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All the Bright Dreams



All the Bright Dreams

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY

Marguerite D'Alvarez



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Marguerite D'Alvarez

By permission of Carl van Vechten

Childhood and Adolescence

Marie and Suzie

Oscar Hammerstein

By permission of "Picture Post" Library

About 1909

Ben

The Concert Singer

1929

By permission of Cecil Beaton

All the Bright Dreams



Prologue



MY FATHER was a descendant of one of the old Spanish families that crossed into Peru in the sixteenth century to conquer the Incas, the royal Indian native race of that mystic land. He had a mixture of Inca and Spanish blood, and the things in my nature I hesitate to question are, I believe, due to my Peruvian ancestors and the endless verbal tapestries my mother wove in my childhood that made them live for me. She unveiled, too, the strange embroidery of her own destiny that linked it so intimately with theirs.

Each day, when my sisters and I returned from our convent school, we asked for another story. Each was like a different page from the calendar of her existence and I found myself constantly reliving her colourful story. Although in a way this forced maturity in my nature, it made an unusual and unbreakable bond between us, and it would be impossible for me to tell of my own life without first speaking of hers.

Here are some of the pictures she painted and some of the tapestries she wove.

When my father was a young man he was sent to Europe on a sailing ship to become a diplomat at the Peruvian Embassy in Paris, taking with him both a secretary and a cook-valet, one to guard his religion and the other his digestion.

Besides his work at the Embassy he studied the piano and composition with Verdi, and had much to tell in later life of the great composer, his depressions and his poverty, which he resented. My father was a Gemini, as I am, and this explains much of the double life he led, studying and living in the Latin Quarter with his little French mistress and using only part of his name, while his title and aloofness he kept for his career. He had everything in his nature—from kindness to cruelty—all ruled by a mediaeval dignity. My mother, after his death, read to me his letters to his brother, another brilliant but unbalanced personality.

The climax of his life came on the day that he went for the first time to the Convent at Notre Dame to visit his cousin who was being educated there and whom his family secretly wished him to marry.

My beautiful mother was also one of the students there and she told me how they met on that memorable day. She was just sixteen and came of an old Conservative French family. Her eyes were kingfisher-blue, her nose was retroussé, and she had red hair in three enormous plaits that had to be tucked into her belt. She was frail, full of naïveté, enthusiasm and French *esprit*, a dreamer and should have been an artist.

She watched my father talking to his cousin and thought him disturbingly handsome. As he looked up, their eyes met. It was instant love on his part.

His cousin, Maria Teresa, brought him over to present him to my mother. She had never met anyone from Peru, his name alone opened vistas of exotic beauty, and she was timidly interested.

After he had left, she asked Maria Teresa to tell her about him and his country. She became more and more fascinated by what she heard and an interest in my father was born in her heart. She waited for his visits to the convent with an inner excitement. He spoke to her often with deference and

aloofness, except in his eyes. One day he asked if it would be possible for him to meet her parents. She became suddenly alarmed and said they would visit her at the half-term, would it not be better to wait until then? Was there anything she could do or tell him in the meantime? He answered, with a mingled smile: "Yes and no, but that too must wait." He told her he was sending flowers to the Madonna in the convent chapel, as he was not allowed to send them to her, and when she knelt to pray, she must remember they were offered to her too. She was disturbed, but did as he had asked her and prayed that she might be forgiven if it were her fault that he had compared her with the Mother of God, whom she loved so dearly.

She counted the days till her parents' visit and at last the famous day was born. She waited in excitement and fear, not knowing how she would face the meeting. When the visitors' bell rang, she prepared her entrance with a flickering feeling of guilt, and crossed the polished floor towards her parents, for the first time with uncertainty. She was a born dancer, and to this day I remember her grace in every movement.

Her parents took her in their arms in turn with affection and reserve and asked her of the state of her mind and health and the progress of her studies. She could hardly answer as the door opened and my father entered. Bowing low to the Reverend Mother, he asked her if she would have the graciousness to present him to my mother's parents, and she brought him towards my grandparents, who stared at him with admiring austerity. For so young a man, my mother told me, it was amazing how he introduced himself and put his country and himself at their command. She stood by, hardly daring to breathe. He did not look at her once, she said, trying to remain as impersonal as his emotions would allow.

Her parents asked him a few vague questions about his

reasons for coming to France and he told them modestly of his occupation at the Embassy. He said he was returning to Peru in three months' time and hoped that they would allow him to visit them before leaving. They tried to make it difficult by saying they lived in the country. He replied that that was unimportant and he would hope for their letter.

From that day he was constantly in my mother's thoughts and her heart would leap as he walked towards her, though Maria Teresa and a young nun never left her side.

When the holidays came, she returned to her family's country estate in Normandy. After dinner her father called her to his study, surrounded by smiling coloured books that exhaled peace and tranquillity. There, questioning her expression as he spoke, he told her of an invitation that had come for all of them from my father's family in Peru.

"The reason for this invitation," he continued, "is that their son wishes to make you his bride. His mother is almost a royal personage, being a direct descendant of the Incas, and she will not allow his marriage until she has met the woman of his choice. We must visit the family to see if they find you worthy."

My mother told me this phrase hurt her and she would rather have refused, but remembering her meetings with my father at the convent she felt instinctively it would be right for her to go.

Then came endless preparations for the visit—new dresses, Spanish lessons every day, and her father reading aloud to her the history of the Incas. She told me she looked at herself in the long mirror as she tried on one of the dresses and suddenly felt grown up. It was a strange feeling. She gave a little scream of delight when she saw the gardenias that had been tucked into the draperies of white tulle and almost knew what it was to become a bride. It was all like a wonderful dream, but there was fear too in the dream. In her heart she had always longed to sing and make a career,

for she had a beautiful voice, but her parents with French conventionality had frowned on the idea. Would this marriage then be the right thing? she wondered. She did not dare approach her parents with the problem. She was not intimate with them though she loved them. They were themselves disturbed at the idea of this marriage, and each time the journey was mentioned her mother wept silently, often into her soup.

As the day of departure drew near, she had an attack of nerves and postponement of the journey was discussed, to my mother's dismay. However, after the family doctor had prescribed very small parcels of brown and yellow powders to be dropped into boiling hot milk, the patient revived and said she was really anxious to leave, until the sound of the trunks being carried down brought on a relapse, and she took again to her bed with her pillow over her ears to shut out the sounds.

At last came the moment when they got into the omnibus with the impatient grey horses to drive to the station and take the train to Le Havre. There they stayed a night to rest and then stepped on to the great ship that would carry my mother to her kaleidoscopic future—and to Peru.

On the voyage they were treated with great courtesy, but the South American food played havoc with my grandfather's digestion. My grandmother insisted on tasting everything and ate copiously. She wore a thick veil over her face and would only lift it to put her fork in her mouth.

To my mother, the three weeks at sea seemed over long, though all the young men on board paid court to her. She was dreaming by day and awake by night, wondering what the future held for her. Would she, she asked herself, be able to face the transition from her own simple life to the grandeur and luxury that were Peru? She could not talk to her father, as he felt violently ill and was infuriated that there

was no Vichy water on board, while her mother had taken firmly to her bed, where she had odd meals almost every hour.

The day of arrival came at last. In port cargoes of sweet-smelling herbs and seeds were lowered on to the dock, where parakeets of every colour, tied to long poles by one leg, fluttered in the breeze like bunches of exotic flowers, and gay beautiful people greeted their friends. My mother's heart and eyes searched in the crowd. My father was late. When at last he arrived, she thought she had never realised how handsome he was. He concentrated all his attention on my grandparents.

Leaving a flock of servants to attend to the luggage, they climbed into a carriage with the finest pair of horses and quickly drove through miles of sunlit streets and splendid avenues lined by houses of ancient architecture, standing in flowered gardens. On the outskirts of Lima, in front of an enormous gate of massive silver, the horses stopped. It was the entrance to my father's home, called Rocafuerte after his father's name—a palace of pink marble in fabulous gardens with every tree in the world and flowers undreamed of, their perfume so strong that my grandmother took to her smelling-salts. My grandfather wanted to know the name of every plant, which my father was at a loss to tell him, unlike the Englishman, who remembers the names of his flowers almost better than those of his children.

The arrival at the Palace was like a royal presentation. The Rocafuerte family sat in a large semicircle in the vast drawing-room with its chandeliers of wrought gold holding candles of the same colour. My grandfather, the Marques de Rocafuerte, who was Lord Chief Justice of Peru, was in full regalia, even to the sword. My grandmother, the Marquesa, sat in the middle with her two ladies-in-waiting a little behind her. Then came innumerable children and grandchildren, all of them beautiful in their own way and

each with great individuality. Behind them all was a small army of employees and servants.

My mother was kissed by the entire family and her father and mother were given a warm welcome in a more aloof way.

After delicious drinks, fruits and ices had been served on large gold and crystal plates, the visitors were shown to their rooms. An entire suite had been placed at their disposal, with a little maid to sleep on the mat outside in case they needed anything in the night. They were speechless. Such luxury they had not dreamed of. All the rooms, even the bathrooms, were enormous, the baths being of pink marble and the taps of massive gold in the form of condors' heads. These baths were so deep that my grandmother asked my grandfather with anxiety if he would hear her call him to help her out. He said he was thinking the same thing himself.

The little maid came in to ask if they needed anything and if they would like to rest on their balcony. She opened a door in a corridor giving on to the patio which belonged to their rooms, then touched her head to show she had forgotten something and made my mother return with her to the bedroom. There she proceeded to scramble for something under the bed. It was a large gold chamberpot. My mother began to laugh and so did the little maid, on the highest note of any musical instrument, the note of a bird.

The patio was almost a garden, with plants and even trees potted in ancient majolica. Humming-birds, their breasts like multicoloured jewels, dropped from the heavens, and butterflies were in profusion overhead, flitting above their favourite flowers. My mother was in a dream, as were they all. They felt they should whisper, wondering what new glories would be shown to them. As they walked back through the rooms, they held hands, afraid of slipping on the marble floors patterned in symbolic designs. My grand-

father knelt down to touch them and told my mother she too must do so, they were so beautiful—too beautiful to be walked on. She burst out laughing and said perhaps they should learn to walk on their hands, would it be more appropriate?

A tap at the door and in came a butler, preceded by the little maid, with an enormous golden tray laden with gifts—bottles of perfume, eau de Cologne for the bath, a jewel-box and sweets wrapped in such lovely papers my mother thought they too were Inca jewels. The jewel-box had a ribbon round it and a large rose pinned to the ribbon; it was not to be opened until later. How could they ever repay such generosity with their modest means? The mystery of it all fascinated my mother, and the prodigality, so different from her own people's thrift, but the tenderness touched her most of all.

When they dressed, their clothes, that had seemed so beautiful at home, now appeared inadequate. Only cloth of gold, they felt, would have been in perfect taste. My mother ran back to the patio, plucked bunches of jasmine and put them in her hair.

As they opened the doors to descend to the drawing-room, a silent servant stood on each side of the portals, so silent that they gasped as both moved towards them and bowed—they thought they were part of the architecture. They smiled with friendly respect and led them downstairs.

The semicircle had now formed into a circle. The family sat on beautiful straight-backed chairs with tapestries embroidered by the Incas. Almost all spoke French, but those who did not smiled on my mother approvingly. My father only looked at her from afar but with so much meaning in his beautiful eyes that she was hypnotised and wished only that the ceremony of this meeting could be abolished and she could fly into his arms.

There were seventy at table in the dining-room, with its

massive gold chandeliers. A Chinese servant stood behind every other chair. They had never dreamed of such wonderful and exotic food, such a perfect choice of wines. My mother looked back already as a stranger to her charming and elegant, but modest, life in France. She wondered anxiously what would be demanded of her? Love would be, she felt, her baptism. She was most moved when, before the meal began, their host said grace and added to the formal words the family's thanks for their visitors' safe arrival. Then her father rose and thanked them all in his most eloquent manner for their gracious reception.

After the meal, the company returned to the drawing-room, the Marquesa and her husband first, the others following according to their age and importance. The visitors were begged to make no ceremony and to retire to their quarters when they wished. How could anyone need to sleep, my mother wondered, in such a country? It was a waking dream of beauty, where every moment counted.

Before they left for their rooms, my father stooped and kissed her hand; she almost fainted. Yes, this must be love. His restraint fascinated her and she longed feverishly for the moment when he and she could be alone.

She undressed and came to kiss her parents goodnight. Her room was so far from theirs she felt she was in another country, and she was glad, as she could think over all that had happened, undisturbed.

The scent of the flowers kept her awake, together with strange, musical sounds in the distance, and she prayed that she might remain in this land, where romance was a religion and all things seemed like the Heaven we are promised.

As she woke next morning, a tray was brought in by the little maid. In the centre a large bunch of jasmine in a crystal vase shone like a diamond, and a small box of pure gold, lined with exquisite pale blue velvet, contained a necklace

of matchless pearls; an emerald formed the clasp, pointed and shining. She could hardly imagine from whom they came, but hoped they were from him. She put them round her neck with trembling hands and flew into her parents' apartment, wondering how they would react to such a gift. They said: "You cannot accept anything so valuable. You are not engaged yet and all must be put in order first."

She asked with tears in her voice how could she return the necklace when she did not know from whom it came?

"We have a very good idea!" they replied.

On my grandfather's tray was a letter speaking of a ball that was to be given that night in their honour. They could hear already the sound of musical heels resounding through the patios and the rumour of festivity to come. For my grandmother there was a card enquiring the colour of the dresses she and my mother would be wearing at the ball, so that they might be sent matching gloves and shoes, which it was hoped they would dance to destruction. And, it added, a surprise in a box would be brought up to my mother, something she must wear, and first she must be measured for it. She hoped it would not be a massive gold belt, as to-night would be the night of the white tulle dress and the gardenias.

Soon it was lunch-time, when they were presented to the family's many friends. Such food and gay conversation, the young girls whispering about their loves and what they would be wearing that night. My mother was lost in admiration of their every gesture, their hands accompanying their conversation like passing butterflies. Even the men moved like dancers but without effeminacy. She felt the eyes of everyone were on her and she could hardly eat from timidity. The largest dinner-parties in France had been for twelve people, and that day there must have been at least a hundred at the table. My father did not wish her to speak Spanish at once. He wanted to teach her every word and

was almost jealous when anyone tried to help her. She loved this and yet it made her a little afraid, as did so much of this new life.

After lunch he came up to her saying he would like to show her the gardens before she rested for the ball, and offered her his arm with great ceremony. They were immediately followed by several cousins. Would they never be alone? He pressed her arm as it lay in his and whispered that he could hardly wait for the night to hold her in his arms in the dance. He begged her to wear the pearl necklace he had sent and to imagine that each pearl was one of the kisses on her throat that he longed to give her. The young Frenchmen she had known had never said such things. It was a revelation. She was fascinated, yet again afraid.

Lying on her bed in the darkened room with the friendly light of the golden lamp hanging above, she prayed to the Madonna, saying that as a woman She must understand all things, and asked Her for guidance, then closed her eyes and slept.

Suddenly she awoke. Her mother was standing by her in a state of excitement, saying they must not be late for the dinner that was to precede the ball. The little maid came forward and offered to brush and plait her long red hair. Then she brought out with bated breath the white tulle dress and its petticoats, all ironed to perfection, and then tried to explain that she must fetch something—the surprise that had been promised.

She disappeared, and after a few moments the Marquesa herself entered, holding ceremoniously a tiara of filigree gold adorned with humming-birds, alive and fluttering, each caught by one little claw to the golden wire. My mother could not bear the thought of their captivity and wondered how she was going to dance with this miniature aviary on her head. Her parents too were horrified, her mother having prepared a coronet of gardenias, which she herself infinitely

preferred, but she realised that these were people to be handled with golden kid gloves and she decided that the tiara must be worn.

When at last she was ready, she looked at herself in the long mirror and was pleased. Her dress was like a fallen cloud, the pearl necklace her only jewel. She curtsied to herself, opening her fan of white lace embroidered all over with seed pearls, another gift from her future family, and felt she was someone unknown. She waited for her parents before descending to the vast drawing-room. The large doors opened to the strains of an orchestra in the scented gardens. Her entrance was greeted with tender applause and the Marquesa told her that the diadem of humming-birds was a tradition of the Incas for their brides and now that she had appeared in it and worn it with so much beauty, it could be taken from her head.

She tried not to show her relief and begged to be excused that she might run to her room and set free the lovely captives. And this she did from her balcony, making a wish as each one flew away. Then, having put on the coronet of gardenias, she returned to the drawing-room and the admiring eyes that warmed her heart.

After the banquet, a series of presentations was made with royal formality. The first dance was with her future father-in-law, so aloof and gallant in his Lord Chief Justice's uniform. He had an almost Chinese face of infinite reserve, and when he smiled it was an event. He danced so beautifully that her shyness disappeared, until he told her he was leading her to her partner for the next dance—and, he hoped, for life. She was so overcome by the importance of this phrase that she swayed in his arms; she had almost forgotten the reason behind all this pomp and ceremony.

Then she saw her future husband coming towards her. With his arms around her as they began to dance, the fear

faded and there was no boundary to her happiness and the intoxication of his eyes as they looked into hers.

He told her that much depended on this night, as their parents were now in one of the drawing-rooms discussing their marriage, and after the third dance they were to join them and know the result.

She trembled and whispered in his ear that even if all were not well, she would be willing to run away with him. He almost lifted her in the air with excitement and said: "I have only one fear—that someone else might be more worthy of you than I." They were oblivious of the eyes that watched them. The orchestra seemed far away and the perfume of the gardenias from the patio intoxicated her still more.

When the third dance was over, he led her to the Dove Room, a small drawing-room with doves embroidered on the silk that covered the walls, their eyes and the tips of their wings of precious stones. The smile with which she was received by her mother and father gave her courage.

The Marquesa rose to kiss her on the forehead and took from her husband, who also stood erect, a small box and passed it to my father to open. He did so with trembling hands and she saw in the red morocco jewel-case the most wonderful Canary diamond, called the Miniature Sun of one of the Inca Gods, for tradition said he had loved it as the sun that shone for him always. My father placed it on her finger. Her parents came to her and kissed her with more tenderness than she had ever known, and an atmosphere of joy filled the room, as the guests came rushing in with congratulations.

The orchestra had been moved to the patio of the gardenias, where the fiancés were now allowed to dance alone. As they passed a shady corner, my father bent down and kissed the diamond on her finger and then, asking permission with his eyes, kissed her on the lips.

When the guests followed them, begging for permission to dance with her, he seemed perturbed, and sensing at once his jealousy, she refused. In Peru jealousy and love are twins and the wife usually spends her life trying to avoid misunderstandings that might cause this cruel pain. Her love is so deep and lasting that should her husband die at an early age, she never remarries but returns to his family, with or without children, to become a daughter of the house. This, however, is not the law for the husband, if the rôles are reversed.

The marriage was to take place as soon as possible and the preparations were immediately begun, the entire household having but one thought. The intervening weeks were spent in visiting different places of interest. My mother told us of the bull-fight she had to attend, which fascinated her by its beauty and glamour and horrified her by its cruelty. She wore a white mantilla on her red hair with pink camellias, and when the toreador saw her, he threw his hat at her feet, offering her his life and the ear of the bull that he was about to fight. This is the ceremony of homage to the most beautiful woman in the audience.

She was overcome by the fear that he might be killed and begged my father to let her return home. She felt guilty that this man should offer her his life. But the music had begun and a dozen toreadors in their impeccable costumes with perfect bodies of masculine grace walked round the bull-ring. They stood in front of her box and raised their hats with Roman ceremony.

She had now to return the hat that had been offered her, and the whole audience was watching to see if it was accurately thrown and reached the feet of the toreador—an omen for his fate. Then the music ceased and the corrido began.

The toreadors offered their lives with complete indifference. They appeared alternately as gladiators and dancers and their faces took on a green pallor, which made their eyes like pools of fuming oil. She was grateful that she had her lace fan, behind which she could hide her eyes when the corrida became too dangerous. She wanted to scream, she told me, and a feeling of loneliness and fear overcame her. How could she adopt this country, where one was baffled by the intermingled tenderness and cruelty? Would this be the problem of her married life?

When the toreador killed the bull, she thought she was going to faint. The animal died with such nobility, pawing the ground with fountains of blood spurting from his nostrils. She would have turned her back, but the crowd had gone mad and jumped into the bull-ring to lift the toreador on their shoulders and carry him to her box.

With a superhuman effort she smiled and raised her arm in recognition of his valour. Her knees were so weak she had almost to be carried down the stone steps, looking like a fading white rose, but she suddenly realised the crowd was waiting for her, intrigued by her beauty and the honour the toreador had bestowed on her on his entrance into the ring.

She pulled herself together and descended with a smile on her lips, on my father's arm, to find the toreador also waiting for her. He bowed low and said it was her beauty that had given him his courage and brought him victory.

My father drew her away, acknowledging curtly his salute, and again she met the look of jealousy in his eyes. Not a word was spoken until they reached their carriage. She closed her eyes, hoping the tears would not roll down her cheeks, and felt that her first battle had begun.

The morning sun of the wedding-day peered through the large stained-glass windows of her room, its light playing on

the counterpane of the enormous four-poster bed, where she lay like *Mélisande*, afraid of and curious about the events of the coming day.

Her wedding dress of brocade had been woven by the Incas of pure gold and silver thread and embroidered with seed pearls by the Spanish nuns. It was so heavy that she could hardly walk in it. The train was of pure gold lace and seemed a mile long. On her head she would wear a small diadem of emeralds, pearls and diamonds, borrowed from the Madonna of Miracles in the family's private chapel.

She wished it were to be a simple wedding in the modest little church at Honfleur, where she was born and where from childhood the statues had smiled on her with tenderness and understanding. Everything would have been so much easier there. The priest who had baptised her had written of his sorrow that he could not marry her too. How she longed to see him again with his jovial, ruddy face and the burst veins in his nose. She always went to him with her childish sorrows and to-day felt that there were more complicated secrets about which to question him.

After a hurried breakfast of exotic fruits, she put on a morning frock and ran down a private staircase to the chapel, where she knelt at the feet of the Madonna of Miracles to ask Her counsel for the day and to pray that she had made the right choice and that she might have many children. A gentle tap on the shoulder from the resident priest roused her. He told her the ceremony would take place in two hours' time, according to Inca tradition, as the sun would then be at its zenith. She thanked him and he tenderly made the sign of the cross on her forehead. As she turned to look again at the Madonna, she thought that She smiled at her and returned to thank Her for allowing her to wear Her diadem. Now she felt more at peace.

She returned to her room, to find everything she was to wear spread out on the bed and four or five maids busying

themselves with details of perfection. They were chattering like birds, more excited than she. She smilingly thanked them for their devotion and went to her bathroom, to find the water already drawn and strewn with petals of gardenias and roses. The soothing, perfumed water acted like a drug and lulled her to sleep.

She awakened by a tap at the door. The maid's horrified face appeared.

"I thought you were dead, *Señorita*!" she cried.

This made my mother laugh and broke the spell of her somewhat morbid emotions. It might be better, she had thought, if she could dream as in death through what was to come; reality might be beyond her frail strength to bear.

After the maid had rubbed her body with invigorating perfume, she felt exhilarated and began to dress with delight. Everything she was wearing was made to match the wedding gown. The shoes were of the same gold cloth heavily laden with seed pearls and were the exact shape of the straight Inca foot. They were most uncomfortable, though so beautiful, and she longed to go barefoot. Her prayer-book was of gold and her rosary beads were of baroque pearls. The yellow diamond on her finger seemed to compete with the sun rising in the heavens. Her red-gold hair was so thick and long that half of it had to be passed through the back of a chair, so that it did not sweep the floor while the other half was being brushed.

The little maid said admiringly: "Your hair would be more beautiful than your dress, *Señorita*, if they would let you have it down."

"How then would I wear the Madonna's crown? She will be the most important guest at my wedding," she answered.

When the plaits encircled her head, she stood while her golden dress was put on by the four maids with gentle fugitive fingers and primitive giggles. Then the double doors opened and the Marquesa entered with her attendants to

supervise the final touches. She kissed my mother on the brow and with a smile gave her, in a small gold casket, two magnificent diamonds, the brother and sister of the yellow diamond ring, to be worn, she said, as earrings. It was all part of this strange ritual and she accepted it graciously, kissing the Marquesa's hand and curtsying as she thanked her.

Strains of music penetrated into the room and filled her with a sense of drama and excitement, and as the family and relations came streaming in to see her, she felt a secret joy. It was as though she were playing the leading rôle in a great and mystic opera and as if her career were not lost to her after all. She had to walk round the room and be approved by everyone. There were tears in many eyes and she was deeply moved by the affection and admiration she felt all round her.

The last to enter was her fiancé in full diplomatic regalia, pallid as his white cloth uniform, embroidered in gold. His reserved admiration enchanted her. Kneeling, he opened a white satin case. In it lay the most important member of the jewel family—the yellow diamond necklace. He rose and clasped it round her neck, then kissed her hand and left her.

Now she was ready. She descended the wide staircase to the music of the Inca orchestra, with the servants and the crowds cheering and crying blessings. She wondered if she were still alive or in the dream of death she had longed for.

As she entered the church on her father's arm, the air was almost overpowering with the scent of candles and flowers, the eternal companions of marriage and death. It seemed a golden world, the church filled with yellow roses, yellow candles and the priests wearing golden vestments. Her gold tissue veil fell round her to the ground, enclosing her in a golden cage which she felt might symbolise her future. The weight of the wedding dress was almost too much for her

delicate body, and the strange warm odour of the wedding veil was stifling. She was overcome by thoughts of trivial things like her accent in Spanish, and would the wedding ring fit, and would she fall down the steps in her Inca shoes.

The organ began to play with such softness that she wondered if only she heard it, and God's presence seemed to permeate the church still more. Her mother and the Marquesa lifted her golden veil with ceremony and tenderness. She breathed again, and as they withdrew to stand behind her, her bridegroom came to her side, handsome and mysterious. The priest, as he blessed them, smiled mystically, his white curls like plumes around his head, his hands like waxen flowers. He was old and saintly, and asked her almost with anxiety, would she take this man for better or worse? Her heart leaping into her throat, she whispered a timid "Yes" and two large tears dropped on to the gardenia in the centre of her bouquet. As her bridegroom put the wedding ring on her finger, she closed her eyes. It fitted perfectly and she was relieved, as this is a great superstition among the Spanish races. Then he stooped down to kiss her hand and offered her his arm, on which she rested the tips of her little captured fingers.

The whole congregation turned to smile, the organ pealed forth and pairs of white doves, tied together with white satin streamers, with orange-blossom necklets round their throats, flew directly to the dome of the church and made a second halo round it. Surely Heaven could not be more beautiful.

They arrived in the large reception-room for congratulations. Would they never be alone? So many compliments were paid her by both men and women, she was glad she spoke Spanish incorrectly; it was almost a disguise. But how warm everyone was and how kind to her faults. She asked her husband to allow her to take off her wedding dress and wear that of her engagement night. Once more giving her his arm, he took her to her apartment. A beautiful white

peignoir, that she had not seen before, was lying on the bed and little white mules with her initials embroidered in seed pearls. He begged to undress her and undid her gown with the tenderness and dexterity of a woman, then told her she must rest, and taking her in his arms like a bunch of flowers, lifted her on to the bed, kissed her on the forehead and silently left her. She felt too excited to sleep, but closed her eyes and within a few moments floated away on a canopy of gold, drawn by doves through a golden world.

The curtains were softly parted by the little maid, smiling on her with curious affection.

"Mi Señora," she said with a curtsy, "your bath awaits you."

It took her several moments to come back to reality, and she longed to be still on the golden canopy to see where the doves would carry her. She wished they were leaving immediately for the honeymoon, but in South America in those days postponement was the custom. It allowed the bride time to become at ease with her husband, and later to enjoy a sojourn in a beautiful part of the country, rested from the fatigues of the wedding day.

She was overjoyed to put on once more her tulle dress, and soon her husband came to accompany her back to the reception-room, to the applause of the hundreds of guests. She longed to dance with him alone instead of under the indiscreet gaze of the crowd in the vast drawing-room, and as though he had divined her thoughts, he led her away into the patio and they danced unseen with the light of the moon and his eyes in unison.

In a whisper he said: "We will pass through the ballroom and say goodnight. There will be supper served in our apartments."

They danced towards their parents and begged permission to leave. This was graciously granted and as her mother kissed her she felt a tear on her cheek as her mother said in a

whisper: "*Dieu te bénisse, mon enfant.*" She wanted to run up the stairs, but feeling all eyes on her, had to walk arm in arm with her husband with poise and grace.

As they entered her room he kissed her once more and asked her would she come for supper to his apartment that she had never seen? He would fetch her, he said, when she called to him, and he would leave open the several doors between their rooms, to hear her voice from afar.

Sensing her inward apprehension of their aloneness and the hovering mystery of what was to come, he said almost inaudibly: "I want it to be you always that calls to me. You are my queen and I am your humble subject."

She blushed with gratitude for his understanding and, when he left her, she danced round the room, saying a gentle good-bye to the rose-patterned mosaics and the four-poster bed with its tender oil lamp, and to herself, who she knew could never be the same again. She knelt for a moment in front of her Madonna, then put on again the white satin peignoir and the seed-pearl slippers. Now she was ready and would call to him.

His apartment was even more beautiful than hers. The balcony windows were open and a table was set for two with glittering silver and large candelabra, round which fireflies and humming-birds were flying in merry-go-round circles. The manservant retired after filling their glasses with champagne, and her husband drank to her beauty and all her desires.

She answered timidly: "They are only to make you happy and never to disappoint you."

She could hardly eat or drink. She wanted to absorb all the beauty of this southern night and to explore as subtly as she could her husband's mind. They talked of many things. At last after a moment's silence, he said softly: "In my country we believe that marriage is not only of the flesh but also of the soul. It must be poetry incarnate."

She found she could not answer, though there was so much she longed to say, and he continued gently: "I wish you to pass through those mysterious gates only when you feel inclined. Adoring you as I do, I will wait until then. It must always be you that calls to me through the open doors. Until that time comes, I will lie with you in my arms and speak of things I have never said before. I will imprint necklaces of kisses round your neck and your breasts, and only ask that if you sleep you will take me with you in your dreams."

Still she could not answer and, lifting her tenderly in his arms, he carried her to his bed.

Her awakening next morning was to a new life. Plans had to be made for their return to Europe. Her heart felt so at home that she secretly wished never to leave, and when her little maid begged to go with her, she burst into tears.

Her husband's anxiety for her to see Peru and its beauties was almost feverish and he proposed their riding as far as possible into the interior towards Callao, the port. A carriage could follow them, he said, with their clothes and necessities and also his groom, Eujenio, who was partly Inca and partly Spanish, and almost his best friend. My mother felt flattered by his solicitous attentions. She was enchanted with the whole idea of the journey, for to ride had been a secret longing in her childhood, though it had horrified her parents as much as her wish to make a career.

The day came for the first riding-lesson. She had chosen her horse and her habit. The latter was of off-white cloth and there was a top hat of golden beaver with a long chiffon veil thrown round it and over her shoulder. There were also orange suède boots; I remember them well for I wore them in the Brigand scene for my first appearance in *Carmen*.

As she descended the stairs on her husband's arm, there was a round of applause, but she begged the family not to

watch her mount for the first time and to wait for her return to judge her horsemanship.

The groom, wreathed in smiles, opened his large, generous palm, that she might place her little foot thereon. Her beautiful steed almost matched her boots and neighed in appreciation as she sat a little tremulously on his hospitable warm back. With her instinctive sense of rhythm, she had no difficulty in falling in with his changes of step and soon trotted and cantered with complete ease.

They were quickly in the heart of the country and my father suggested dismounting to visit one of the ancient Inca tombs. They descended a few steps under the ground and a sudden stillness met them. Her heart began to thump wildly. In front of her she saw sitting in a circle a family of five Incas—mother, father and three children—embalmed but in such perfect preservation that she could not believe they were not still alive. They even wore jewels, which, my father explained, were never stolen, since to rob a dead Inca is supposed to bring a curse. He asked her if she wished to sit in contemplation, as they were a Holy Family. He himself seemed to be in a dream, his racial feelings were so strong, and he told her that when they were back in Europe he would initiate her into the mysteries of his family tree, written on vellum with a sacred poem by the patron saint of Lima, Santa Rosa.

On the way home they hardly talked. The *cavallo de passo*, the step of the Arab horse, is quite different from the European; it is from side to side, as if one is sitting in a rocking-chair, and she arrived back, fresh and unbruised, to receive an ovation from the family as she entered the gates. She felt less of a stranger after the experiences of the morning and looked forward feverishly to the trip through Peru.

The few days that were left before their departure were full of excitement. There were picnics in the country with everyone on horseback, except the Marquesa, who with her

two ladies-in-waiting mounted white mules. Servants were sent the night before to choose a place of the greatest beauty, and more important still, one where there were brown stones which attracted the rays of the sun. There a whole half-oxen was put overnight to cook, to be ready for eating when the party arrived the next day. Almost everything that Peru contained was brought for the meal, the marvellous breadfruit in its green cocoon (a rival to the best French rolls), paltas, mangoes and cheremoyas, fruits like ice-cream with a pattern of velvet-green coat of mail, indescribable drinks made of fruit, and, last but not least, the famous crystal-white drink made from grape-seeds, called pisco. I remember, when in childhood my eyes remained weak after an attack of measles, my nurse put pads of pisco on my eyelids, saying: "These are God's tears and must cure you."

For one of the picnics there were gathered together wonderful native dancers, the women in their colourful dresses and the men in trousers so tight that one could see the movements of their muscles as they danced. They arrived on horseback in pairs, men and women. The men never smiled, and it was hard to believe that when they danced with their women it was a language of passion and desire. Their bodies hardly came together—they kept a discreet distance—everything was in the face and mind. As they danced, the musicians of a small Inca orchestra blew through the dried ankle-bones of their dead ancestors, and the sounds were so human that it was as if they still called to them. This seemed to excite the dancers to a frenzy as they turned madly and fell to the ground in fanatic ecstasy.

Later, an orchestra of guitars and drums replaced the first. This was the time for the company to dance. Boards were put down, and silent peasants with admiring eyes came from every corner to clap their hands in rhythm. The moon peered through the heavens, so low in the sky that she seemed an invited guest, and by her light one could trace

without indiscretion the desire in the eyes of the dancers. My mother told me that the air was permeated with eroticism, but restraint and respect for the women were always there.

When the picnic was over, two riders returned on each horse, and the blessings of the native dancers and the orchestra followed them on the breeze. Though the air was cool, her husband's body against hers and his arm round her waist, as he held the bridle, were as warming as the mid-day sun. All sang folk-songs as they rode, and on arriving home they changed into bathing-suits and swam in the large pool in the patio.

My grandparents were leaving almost immediately and were very disturbed that my mother would not be taking the boat with them. The dinner on the night before their departure was gloomy, my grandmother wearing mental *crêpe*. Afterwards my mother passed an hour with them alone. The stay in Peru seemed to have made little impression on my grandmother; my grandfather by contrast said he would like to remain there for ever. An argument ensued, which gave my mother an opportunity to escape from the room and fly into her husband's arms. He suggested that to make the parting less painful she should drive alone with them to the station next day.

Everyone rose with the birds in the morning. The house sounded like an aviary. She hated herself for the relief she felt that her mother was leaving, but there was a timid pain in her heart at the thought of seeing her father go.

The procession of carriages came to the door. She entered the first with her parents. Every moment of the drive had its beauties, all of which my grandmother ignored, thinking of nothing but what she might have forgotten and hiding behind her handkerchief in a state of collapse. My mother longed to laugh but did not dare.

She said her goodbyes at the station, as she had a premoni-

tion that if she went further they might insist on her accompanying them to France. After repeated embraces through a very wet veil, which each time it was lifted caught on the beak of a strange bird, sitting as though roosting on the crown of her hat, her mother detached herself abruptly, almost throwing her into her father's arms. He pressed her to his bosom without a word. A sadness invaded her and she turned away that he might not see her tears, then returned to the carriage and sat there until her husband joined her. Even the great bunch of roses he had left to keep her company while he was away could not console her.

It was her first parting from her family. Childhood was over and this was her coming-of-age.

From that day my mother determined that my father too must realise that she had grown up. As a lover he was perfect but they had had no intellectual life together as yet, and he treated her rather as a child. She was excited beyond words at the thought of returning as a married woman to Paris and especially to the convent, but was secretly troubled about her husband's life there before their marriage, and wondered if she was catching the disease of jealousy from him.

A few days before they were to leave, he came to her room, preoccupied. There was to be a farewell dinner that night, he told her, for the grandees of Spain who had settled in Peru, when his uncle, the youngest admiral in the Peruvian Navy, would reveal a great secret to the family and their invited friends. There would be a hundred at table and he had made a request that the women should wear their most beautiful Inca jewels, the most fabulous precious stones in the world, and the men their uniforms; everything was to be served on golden dishes.

During the day the Marquesa sent for my mother as though to an audience. The lady-in-waiting said she would

return to lead her through the vast house when she was ready.

She found the Marquesa sitting in front of a large frame, embroidering the head of a famous Madonna of the Roses. Her room was a blaze of gold. She wore no glasses and delighted in showing my mother how difficult it was to insert the semi-precious stones for the Madonna's necklace. She worked in silence and her little hands were weighed down by enormous emerald and diamond rings.

Before my mother left her, she called to one of her ladies to pass her a box of jewels and from it handed her a small case, saying: "I wish you to wear this necklace to-night, but to-night only. It is not a gift. You will understand later." Then, kissing her on the brow, she led her to the door and waved to Assunta, the companion, to accompany her back to her apartment.

She wandered into the patio, down the path of lilies to the large fountain, and wondered as she sat there at the mystery of these people and asked herself why had the necklace been given her for one night alone? She had not looked at it yet, and opening the case was almost blinded by the brilliance of the diamonds, blazing in competition with the sun. She felt transplanted into another world, and when her husband found her, she ran to him and, showing him the necklace, asked him eagerly to whom had it belonged—some Inca goddess perhaps? He did not answer, but instead enquired if she had worn it yet? There was such strangeness in his voice that she was frightened as she answered, "No." He looked long at her and almost ceremoniously led her back to her room.

Her maid came to dress her. She knew it was a night of great importance and had already prepared the golden dress and the enslaving Inca shoes. When she was ready, she waited for her husband, for she was doubtful about the wear-

ing of the necklace without his permission. He smiled with admiration when he saw her and said: "You are my bride again and I must conquer you anew." She trembled with delight and, lifting the necklace, asked with her eyes what she should do. He hesitated and his face became like a mask as he put it reluctantly round her neck.

Years later, he told her its history. It had belonged to an Inca princess who was forced to marry one of the *grandees* of Spain. She was so shocked by this loveless union with one of her people's enemies that she stabbed herself and died.

As my mother descended the stairs on my father's arm, she saw approaching them a procession of beautiful men and women, the latter in glorious eighteenth-century bouffant dresses, adorned with Inca jewels almost blinding in their brilliance, and the men in their naval, military and diplomatic uniforms. Together they formed a human panorama reminding her of a picture she had once discovered in a museum in France, which had fascinated her so much that she had returned each week to gaze on it. Little did she then dream that one day it would come to life for her. She was presented to each personage in turn and each gave her the warmest greeting, as though they had known her always. She was particularly impressed by my father's uncle, who had the strangest, almost evangelistic expression, and stooping to kiss her hand looked into her eyes with a half-smile. She felt it was an honour to meet him.

In the dining-hall there was a solemnity she had never felt before, and at last her uncle-in-law rose to disclose his secret. He asked the guests to realise the danger of the Chileans' envy of the riches of Peru and he appealed to them eloquently to help defend their country with romance and determination. Would the women give their most treasured jewels, he asked, and the men part of their fortunes to build a great modern warship which would be constructed in England?

Then large golden salvers were passed round the table by the Chinese servants and immediately, without regret, the women denuded themselves of their priceless jewels and heaped them in glittering piles, while my father rose, unfastened the necklace round my mother's neck and added it to the dazzling cornucopia. And an atmosphere of pride and joy in sacrifice for so great a cause filled the room.

Next, a large trunk, covered in crimson velvet, with the Marquesa's ladies-in-waiting standing on each side, was filled from the gilded dishes, and finally an enormous key was turned in the lock and handed to the Admiral.

Then the company rose from the table. The men went to the Room of the Doves to discuss plans of defence, the women to one of the drawing-rooms, where they talked to my mother of her coming trip through Peru and invited her to visit their châteaux at this season of the Estancia, the lassoing of the new-born ponies, in which old and young, masters and servants, took part. When the men rejoined them, their faces were grave, but they soon relaxed and joined in the talk of this uniquely Peruvian sport, happy at the idea of the young bride taking part in it. My mother was again fascinated by the complexities of this strange people, and a feeling of mingled pride and humility overcame her that she had been chosen by my father to share their life.

All too soon came the day of departure. My mother's heart was faint at the thought of leaving her new family, who, she felt, had become more hers than her own. She had been deeply touched the night before to find lying on her dressing-table a golden key, sewn to a heart-shaped cushion, with the written words: "That you may enter whenever you will. This apartment is yours for ever."

She passed the whole morning with the Marquesa, who dismissed her ladies-in-waiting and then asked her many questions, such as, did she want to have a child? and when

she did, would she come back and let it be born in Peru? She promised that, if possible, she would and hoped that it might be a boy.

The Marquesa also asked about France and the French. My mother said, taking her hand: "I have become so much one of you all, and have been so happy here, that I can remember hardly anything of my life before I came."

Her mother-in-law was delighted and answered with a smile: "If I could tempt my mule to swim, I might even join you there! But, alas, one cannot change steeds in the middle of the ocean, as you will on your journey. Now let us go to the fountain at the end of the lily-path and have some refreshment. Many friends will be waiting to wish you farewell."

My mother was on the verge of tears and would rather have been alone. But after gay conversation with the charming women, who all promised to visit her in France, the clouds melted away.

"We will come for the baptism," they said laughingly. She blushed and felt suddenly the importance of what might be hers—the carrying of new life within her—the birth of a child of her own—and for the first time she longed for the experience—it would be completion. When her husband returned, he questioned her about her day, and asked what was the unknown expression he saw in her eyes? She said she could only speak of it in his arms that night.

Next day the sun was hardly peeping above the mountains when they rose. She told her maid to bring her bathing-suit, as only cold water could rouse her to the actualities of the day.

Her husband joined her in the pool and for the first time they played like children, splashing and diving like young dolphins. Heads appeared at the windows. Breakfast was served and they must hurry.

On the way to their rooms, she begged him to allow her to

take the little maid with them, at least as far as the coast. He said it was too late to arrange anything so intricate, and promised he would be her maid in all that she needed.

"Even to the brushing of my hair?" she asked, laughing.

"Even to that—and more," he answered gravely.

Then began a series of goodbyes from the kitchens upwards. The Chinese servants were the only ones who controlled their emotions. The others wept and knelt for my father to bless them. The Marquesa and her husband begged my mother to take care of their son. "And of his moods too," they added with a smile. Her heart thumped anxiously, but she replied: "I haven't noticed them yet." They both kissed her tenderly and made the sign of the cross on her forehead.

She asked for her little maid. The Chinese servants ran in every direction on their swift, silent feet, searching, but she was not to be found. My mother felt she could not leave without seeing her and instinctively ran up to the church, and there found her, lying on the altar-steps, sobbing out her heart. She took her in her arms and promised that when she had a child she would try and send for her. Her joy was touching, the tears ceased, and they knelt together to thank God with different gratitude for His different gifts. My mother told her to remain in the church until they had left, and stooping to kiss her on the forehead she had to disentangle the little brown hands that clung to hers. She was overcome and flew through the corridors and down the marble steps and almost leapt on to her horse unaided.

Turning in the saddle, she looked up to the balcony where stood her parents-in-law and called her thanks to them for all the happiness they had given her. She was weeping and covered her face with the veil of her riding-hat as they rode away. The streets were crowded with villagers to wish them Godspeed and she had to lift the tear-stained veil to smile at them.

When they reached the open country, her husband

turned to her and said: "From to-day begins a different and a healthier life." And he told her of the Inca farmers and the way they tilled their land with the strength of giants and no machinery but an enormous stone, harnessed to a mule, that made symmetrical patterns in the rich red earth to the very top of the mountains. They earned practically nothing, he said, but their wants were few. They ate only two bowls of rice a day and chewed cocaine leaves, and trusted implicitly for their welfare to God, who never failed them. Their wives made matting and dozens of beautiful children and were content with the warmth of the sun and their babies' arms round their necks.

My mother was enchanted with all she heard, but when they stopped at a farm for refreshment it made her sad to see how badly housed these people were—the mud floors with chickens, dogs and children intermingled, and old people sitting in different corners, with intelligent wrinkles in their faces and wisdom and kindness in their tired eyes. Their beautiful feet, that had never worn shoes, were stretched before them, and their still powerful hands, holding a rosary, lay listless in their laps. One did not know to whom they belonged; whenever they entered, they were asked their needs and they were fed wherever they sat.

The beds in the farmstead were boards, covered with beautiful ponchos of the most amazing colours, my mother said, that she had ever seen. When she admired them, the peasants offered them to her. They would not allow the visitors to pay for their refreshment, only begged them to return.

Soon they would be arriving at the first château with its own farm attached to it, and my father told her of the unique lines on which it was run. Contracts, he explained, were made with China and Japan for relays of workers to be sent to farm the land in their own special way. Their habits and

customs were respected by the manager, an Englishman, as were those of all the other workers. Each nationality had its own little village with its own church. The Chinese were allowed to gamble until twelve o'clock at night, when a curfew was sounded and they had to stop immediately or the manager with stick uplifted chased them to bed. The Japanese had a lake to bathe in. The Negro cotton-pickers were allowed to dance their own dances on Saturday nights and were given as much rum as they were able to imbibe; there were no bad results from the over-drinking, it seemed a necessity in their lives. The Peruvian peons staged amateur bull-fights with a cow instead of a bull, which is infinitely more dangerous, as like all females she keeps her eyes open and nearly always gets her man. Each nationality kept strictly to itself, as there had been dramas, and even some deaths, through jealousy and men poaching on other men's preserves. The young men of the master's family helped the manager to keep order, closely watched by their parents, for mixed loves were all too prevalent, but babies, legitimate or not, were looked after and never allowed to starve. In one of the châteaux where my parents stayed, a little coal-black Negress, whom they had noticed on account of her charming manners, was asked to the drawing-room after dinner. She came, dressed in a check gingham gown, to play the piano, which she did admirably. My father later told my mother that she was a delightful *faux pas* of one of his cousins, but that was never mentioned and she was loved by all the family.

Nothing my mother had ever seen, she said, had made such an impression on her as this way of life, where each race was respected and none preferred, and she had much more to tell us, for which I have no space, of that amazing trip through a new world of generosity, understanding and tolerance for all.

From château to château they made their way to the coast and were overwhelmed by the hospitality and warm reception they were given at even the smallest inns.

When at last they reached Callao, the port seemed asleep in the sunshine. The dockers were as graceful as dancers and took a long time to load the cargoes, but they worked with a rhythm and in a silence that achieved results. The silence was only broken by bizarre calls to each other as they hoisted the heaviest weights. The ship that would carry my parents looked like a miniature toy in the distance, but became more imposing as they drew near. The Captain and many friends were waiting to welcome them, and after much champagne had been drunk, goodbyes were said and the anchor was lifted.

My mother went to her cabin and through the port-hole watched the coast slipping silently away from her. Her eyes filled with tears and she breathed a silent thanksgiving for all that this land had given her and prayed that she might be allowed to return one day and explore more deeply its complicated and mysterious charm.

My parents went first to Paris, but their stay there was a short one, for within a few days my father heard that he was being transferred to the Peruvian Embassy in Berlin. My grandparents were horrified and my mother was in despair. How could she face, she asked herself, the people who had destroyed her country? She felt she could not, yet knew that a refusal to accompany her husband would mean the end of her marriage—and in the end she forced herself to go.

She never had a really happy moment in Berlin, she told us, though my father allowed her loved old nurse to go with her. And when within a few months she found that she was going to have a child, her unhappiness became more acute. Her child would be born on German soil, a German, who if

a boy might perhaps have to fight her own people. It was unthinkable—it should not be.

New strength came to her with the new life within her, and she made up her mind to approach Count Bismarck himself and appeal to him for an exception to be made in her favour.

In spite of my father's opposition, she insisted on his arranging the interview through his Embassy, and when after many delays the appointment was made, she went alone to the Chancellery, armed only with her beauty, intelligence and fanatical determination to fight for her child.

We could never persuade her to tell us the details of that meeting. Throughout the years it seemed to remain a nightmare, of which she could hardly speak. All she would say was that the Chancellor was sternly courteous but adamant in his insistence that the child she was carrying, if it were a boy, must be a German.

She returned home in despair and lay for what seemed hours trying to regain calm. This was the most difficult decision she had ever had to take. Finally she made up her mind that she would go back to France for the birth, although she knew her husband could not leave his diplomatic duties and she dreaded the thought of going through her ordeal without him. But when he heard her decision, he would not accept it.

"I could not bear it!" he exclaimed. "There must be another solution."

And suddenly he cried: "I have it! Why did I not think of it before? The child must be born in our Embassy here. Then he will be a Peruvian."

And throwing himself at her feet, he clasped her in his arms and they mingled their kisses and tears.

During the weeks that followed, with his Minister's permission a large library in the Embassy was arranged as a bedroom and there, just before the event, my mother went

with her old nurse, who acted as midwife with a skill and calm that no professional could have excelled.

All through the night my father stayed with her, never letting go her hand. Her nails dug a shell-like pattern into his palm: later he told her he hoped it would remain there always. She refused sedatives and drugs, for, she said, she must be conscious every moment: suffering, she felt, was a small price to pay for that great initiation.

Towards the end the doctor asked my father to leave and wait in the next room. The moments dragged on. She asked herself: "Will this never end? Can I bear more?" The nurse whispered: "*Courage, mon enfant!*" One last effort—a crash of pain—and then my father, waiting desperately, heard a sudden shrill cry. Their son was born.



PART ONE

The Child





Liverpool



FROM the moment of my brother's birth, my mother began a new rôle in life. She became the adored Mamma of our childhood and my father became the Papa. It is of them and of myself that I will now speak.

After the return home from the Peruvian Embassy many things had to be decided. First, Mamma insisted that they must leave Germany. She had never drawn one really happy breath in Berlin and her great desire now was to bring up a family calmly. She thought that perhaps a consular position for my father would ensure a more normal life, and he was not averse to the idea. Unlike my brother, who in after years undertook the same career, he was not ambitious. He was above all a scholar, whose books meant most to him, and a less expensive way of living would leave more to spend on his hobbies—music, sport, horses, gambling (my mother's greatest cross), and his love of furniture, antiques and beauty in all its forms. But, he asked, would she be happy in what she must realise would be a life in the provinces, very different from, and much less glamorous than, the one she had so far known.

She answered that if he did not regret the change, she would adapt herself. He told her that he had heard from some of his colleagues how happy they had been in England, and that had given him a wish to live there. She too had

heard that England was a wonderful place for the education of children. So it was agreed that he should approach his Minister and see if a transfer could be arranged.

After weeks of anxious waiting they were informed that he had been named Consul-General at the Peruvian Consulate in Liverpool and they were both happy in the decision.

They sailed from Hamburg to Liverpool. Their landing in England could not have been sadder. It was cold and grey and the gulls in giant flights almost took refuge on their heads. But there was solidity and safety in the air. While Eujenio and the nurse were fossilised by the cold and the strange environment, my parents were fascinated by the busy docks with the colourful ships from all lands awaiting their cargoes, and the amazing shire horses pulling enormous loads without apparent effort, their harness shining through the fog.

The Chancellor from the Consulate met them with a smile and had arranged for a suite for them at the Adelphi Hotel. Arrived there, he told them he had selected several houses that they might find suitable for their future home, and he would be glad if they could make their choice as soon as possible.

The next morning the departing Consul-General sent his carriage with a large bunch of roses for my mother and an invitation to dinner the following night, putting himself entirely at their disposal.

They drove through wide streets of fine houses standing in large gardens with great trees, and after a morning of inspection finally decided on a comfortable "family residence" on the outskirts of the city. It was double-fronted and covered in Virginia creeper, spacious yet intimate, on two floors only, with a big square hall and three large sitting-rooms, the drawing-room with French windows opening on to an immaculate lawn. The garden had big beds of roses of every

colour, the borders were bright with sunflowers, candytuft, marigolds and sweet williams, and hollyhocks nodded against the walls. At its end was another lawn less immaculate, with old trees, in which the rooks had cawed for generations, and a rustic summer-house that later became our second nursery.

They thought a little wistfully of the sunlit patio with its fountains and orange-trees, its camellias and scented lilies and the humming-birds flitting over all, but they loved this English garden for its mellow peace, its dignity and reserve, so different from the profusion and exuberance of that other land.

This was the kingdom that they came to and that my mother, with her artistic taste and her French practical sense, made into our loved home, perfect in its mingling of beauty and comfort. For its furnishing, she scoured the antique shops of the city with the Chancellor as her devoted interpreter, for at that time she could not speak a word of English. Even later she never learned it correctly, but rather gloried in her pretty accent and original phrasing.

After they had been settled a few months, she was able to tell my father with much happiness that the "family" home was not in vain, as she was going to have another child. She prayed that this time it might be a girl, and in answer to her prayer, in November of that year, my sister, Maria Fernanda, was born and became her idol. She adored her always for her beauty, her talents and even her faults, for she felt responsible herself for what was ill adjusted in her child's nature. With my brother Ben Mamma had a unique understanding and their brilliant correspondence through the years when he was working in various foreign Embassies should have been published. Alas, it was burned at the sad time when I lost most of my loved possessions in a fire at the Gare des Batignolles in Paris.

My other sister, Suzanna Assunta, was born two years

after Marie. She had a great practical intelligence, but was less demonstrative and much more British than the rest of us. For her, Mamma had much admiration with, perhaps, less tenderness.

After her birth, my mother felt that her family was complete, but Fate thought otherwise, and four years later, I, Marguerite Amelia, who by contrast was all Latin, came into the world. I was the unwelcome one, and I have always thought that the fundamental sadness in my superficially gay nature must have derived from a pre-natal intuition of unwantedness.

By a strange coincidence, when my career took me to Australia, I met there the midwife who had presided at my and my sisters' births, and she told me many things about my mother that I had not known. Among them, of her despair at my father's anger when he heard I was to be born and of how, in her misery, she had run down to the beach where they were staying, with her peignoir floating in the wind and her auburn hair trailing to the ground, and of how he had found her on the edge of the sea and had carried her back, filled with remorse for what he felt she had meant to do.

Because of the sense of guilt this gave her, Mamma had a more anxious feeling for me than for the others and I responded to it a thousandfold. She was the pivot of all our lives, like some lovely maypole of which each of us held bunches of the multi-coloured ribbons, but for me she was much more. She was the quintessence of all I have loved most in life—beauty, poetry, romance, and the tenderness that is strong and that protects. I adored her for all those things and, by a strange contradiction, there was maternity too in my love. I was her baby, yet she was my child.

I can see her now as we used to find her when we rushed home from school, lying on her sofa in some, to us, fairy-like garment, one hand behind her head, shaking one little foot,

on which a golden mule hung lingeringly, loath to leave it. I can still hear her lovely voice, filled with rainbows, calling "*Entrez!*" to our impatient knock. In we would run, and, looking back as it were through the wrong end of memory's opera-glasses, I see it all like a tiny Surrealist picture of those vanished days—Mamma, as I have tried to describe her, and we three crowding round in our "period" sailor suits, Marie strewing her lesson-books, her mackintosh and umbrella—the appendix of the English!—in all directions. Suzie with her possessions firmly strapped together, and I with nothing but my pencil-box with its colourful sharply pointed pencils, for what was the use of bringing home books I would never have time to open?

Often we would ask Mamma to translate the dreams we had had the night before, for she gave the greatest importance to them, and each morning, when we visited her in her four-poster bed with the oil-lamp burning in its ceiling of Spanish leather, she would ask us ours. She would tell me with mock severity not to embroider mine, for even in those early days she reproached me—and rightly—for too much imagination. Then she would hurriedly write them down with the pencil that she had tied to her pillow by a golden chain, for she vowed that her maid ate and digested all the others, and later she would interpret them from various mysterious volumes smelling of the perfumes that old leather alone can retain. Often she would be holding a pencil as long as a wand with a mother-of-pearl top, on which the light shone to make a world of dancing colours. With it she would be writing fantastic dinner-party menus, painted by her with appropriate designs, such as a bullock's head with golden horns entwined with gorgeous bunches of fruit and a golden ring through its nose, studded with jewels. Everything she did held excitement and imagination. And it was not only a child's idealisation that made it appear so.

In Liverpool at that time there were many lovely and

interesting women in the consular circle, mostly foreigners of great personality, yet very quickly she became the leader of them all. She formed a French Club for social activities, discussions and the production of the latest French plays, in which she took part, and on the slightest provocation she sang and danced at the city's social gatherings. It was the life she had always longed for.

My father did not wholeheartedly approve of this emancipation, though he was extremely proud of her. As time went on, he became more of a recluse and would lock himself for hours in his library with his beloved leather-bound books, which he always polished himself. Sometimes, but only occasionally, he would invite us children to join him and would then read aloud to us passages of special beauty. We felt very honoured and sat like statues. It was always an event to be with him, for he was on the outskirts of our lives, rather like a guest in his own house.

Every month Mamma gave a Musical Evening, at which he was the central figure. Then he would play the piano beautifully, both his own compositions and those he had studied with Verdi, and Marie would play the harp, Ben and Suzie the violin; I, being too small to play anything, just sat and listened. Invitations to these Evenings were greatly in demand, but rehearsals were volcanic and the members of the family orchestra were usually not on speaking terms when they went up to bed. Mamma would take it all as the greatest joke and, laughing merrily, would cry: "*Vous n'êtes que des enfants: de la discussion naît la lumière.*"

There were bells in her gaiety that nothing could silence, though the difficulties with my father became more intense through the years. His love of gambling grew by degrees into a passion, and when he lost heavily at the club he made her feel responsible and to compensate would buy her an expensive jewel, which she would never wear and thus anger him still more. The strange sadistic streak in his nature became

more acute and he was jealous of my brother, with whom she was able to find the mental companionship she had longed for but had never been able to achieve with him. When he made scenes she became as though frozen and never argued, but a film of sadness would cloud her lovely eyes and her spring-like gaiety would fade. It was like autumn with no candles and no fire in the grate.

This constant conflict between my parents was the nightmare of my youth, and it was my rôle to be the buffer between them. I knew Papa's mood by his step when he came home in the evenings and was in a state of perpetual nervous tension for her. In those days I was very thin and full of fears of many things, but above all of wrong vibrations, which I could sense before entering a room. My premonitions were my prompters and were rarely wrong. To soothe him, when I felt he was in a bad mood, I would do imitations of our acquaintances and invent what I thought witty monologues, to the detriment of my home-work. They would make him laugh uproariously, but I never felt he loved me, only resented my and Ben's protection of Mamma.

I longed to have someone with whom I could talk about her. My sisters were hopeless. They already thought me more than strange because I would not join them in games with their dolls and later was not interested in tennis and croquet and cards. They were both beautiful in their different ways—Marie with Mamma's lovely auburn hair and aquamarine eyes, Suzie with soft chestnut-brown hair and eyes of hazel; both had immaculate milk-white skins. Beside them I was like a gipsy changeling with my almost black hair, cut in a heavy fringe, big, dark eyes and pale yellow skin, so pale that to my fury people would stop our governess in the street and suggest remedies for my supposed anaemia.

I had few friends of my own age and felt condescending towards those I had; they always seemed to need to have explained to them things that came readily to me. My only

real companions were my animals—Josephine the goat, Doris the dachshund, and Peter the hedgehog. Josephine was the favourite. I had bought her in an animal market for two-and-sixpence—a tiny bundle of skin and bones, with rickety legs, intelligent eyes like moonstones and lovely little hooves that I polished diligently every morning. I fine-combed her coat too, in spite of the buttings she tried to give me, though always with her upper lip raised in a smile. After I had bought her, I carried her secretly to the nursery and hid her in an antique cupboard which had cracks in the wood that allowed her to breathe. She seemed to understand she must not be heard and only gave faint little squeaks like those of the priests' new shoes, as they walk up the church aisles to give their maiden speech. She seemed a trifle limp next morning when she came out of the cupboard and hardly stirred, but soon revived and was accepted by the family and introduced to Doris and Peter and Mamma's dogs and Persian cats. I taught her to play hide-and-seek, and when she found me, as I always let her do, she would stand on her hind legs and literally laugh, her mouth wide open with joy. With my few pennies, kept surreptitiously in an old silver money-box, I bought some expensive rocksalt to sharpen her teeth, which it did so successfully that she nipped off all the buds in the rose-garden, and Papa in his rage on discovering them tried to kill her. I flew with her in my arms and hid her in my bed, where she lay without making a sound, looking like a tired old dancer who had done her last *pas de deux*, until the danger was past. Our adoration was mutual. She would come alone to the convent to meet me and nobody could make her budge till I appeared, even if they tempted her with her favourite leaves. Doris and Peter were great friends and would play games together. Their favourite was for Doris to take a leap over Peter's head, prick her stomach on his quills, yelp and then turn a somersault in the air, while Josephine

watched curiously; I think she imagined Peter was part of a broom and could not understand how he moved.

We had a dear Irish nurse, who called Josephine a "contrairy bhoy." She scolded me more than the others, but I felt she loved me more. And there was our splendid Bretonne cook, quite the most important member of the household. She had the broadest, shiniest face in the world and every tooth in her head was perfect and completely square. She never saw her feet as her bosom was like a balcony and so was her posterior, of both of which she was extremely proud. She wore the loveliest real lace caps, large velvet cuffs, earrings and a cross made of filigree gold. Thus she cooked, never staining her dress or her spotless linen apron, wide enough to make a wigwam. Her amorous indiscretions were difficult to explain to the rest of the staff, and Mamma had to invent fantastic tales of adopted children being brought to England to be educated at our expense. Finally she was forced to say that in France modistes and cooks had to be of easy virtue or they rarely made a chic hat or a good dish. The maids replied that they preferred plain English cooking anyway.

Mamma herself was a marvellous cook and the only possessions of which she took the utmost care—far more than of her Inca jewels—were her wooden spoons, which were hung on a gold chain like a barbarian necklace from some African tribe. She insisted that there were male and female spoons, the latter only to be used to stir sauces of such a texture that to taste them was like swallowing multicoloured clouds. On Sundays all the staff were sent to the longest Mass, so that she could have the kitchen to herself, as she could not bear anyone to watch her cooking. She explained to me that, as in love, mystery must play a great part in the blending of food. After her banquet was prepared, it was locked up in a special

larder, and a dinner-party was given every Sunday night, to which only those with intellectual palates were invited. She paid me the tremendous compliment of allowing me to taste what she cooked and give my opinion.

I seem to have been born with an understanding of food and wines and it was fostered by Papa and my godfather, a great Portuguese poet and a *bon viveur* of the first calibre, who also lived in Liverpool. When I was at the convent they used to come and take me out for lunch on Saturdays. We would go to a place that sold all kinds of Continental delicacies, called, I think, Nixon and Thews; there was nothing you could dream of that the proprietor and his French wife had not imported. Madame had a beautiful head, sat in a swivel chair and took a great joy in selling and wrapping. Her husband was her complete opposite, tall and gaunt, with very small, intelligent eyes and a drooping moustache. His only preoccupation was to look at the price of everything through a magnifying-glass. She was less interested in the prices than in the perfume of all that she sold, and she parted with a kind of maternal regret from her hams, truffles and cheeses. For privileged customers there was a counter for "tastings," and we used to spend two or three hours sampling everything. Wines and liqueurs were included, and to these Saturday sessions I owe my detective palate and my indignation at gastronomic ignorance, when I encounter it among my friends. After a few of these mornings, however, I not surprisingly had to go to bed on a milk diet for a week and was strictly forbidden by Papa to tell Mamma or the doctor the cause.

The other childhood's personality I shall always remember was our Scottish governess, Miss Green, the Lady of the Cameo. She wore this Victorian relic every moment of every day, and one night, when I had a diabolical pain and had to go to her room, I noticed even in my suffering that it was pinned into the large Toby frill of her nightdress. I loved her

for her Scottish integrity, but almost hated her for her discipline, so alien to my nature but so good for it as I found in later years, and for her attempts to standardise everything in me that was individual. She tried too to take charge of my piano-playing, as she considered she was highly musical. I resented this and, becoming bored at the lessons, would suddenly break into improvisation. When she said: "That is not what is written," I would answer: "But it's much more interesting."

Music and drama were from the beginning my delight; they seemed to belong to me instinctively. The crowning glory of my early memories is the soul-stirring evening when I played one of the Three Little Maids in a performance of *The Mikado* given by one of Liverpool's leading hostesses. The night before I surreptitiously put my hair in curling-pins and could not sleep from the pain or excitement—or both. The next morning, to my horror, it was frizzy beyond combing. I looked most convincingly negroid, but, alas, not remotely the Japanese of my dreams. My sisters laughed me to shame and I wept and did not want to appear. Nevertheless, I had a great success—particularly with my fan, which I used dramatically and relentlessly. My voice was considered too loud, for it drowned the other two Little Maids' and in the dance that followed they trod on my heels to show their resentment.

When the time came for me to go to school, I was terrified, but I owe a great deal of my development to that convent education. Meeting the different personalities of the nuns and the girls, and having to learn to hold my own with them, gave me self-confidence and gradually I made quite a place for myself, though my sisters, who were already established there, did nothing to help me. At one point they announced they had heard I was going to be expelled if I did not change my eccentric handwriting. I was in despair and said I could no more change it than my front teeth and I went in terror

for days. The walk to school was always an effort. At that hour of the morning the streets were uninteresting and there was often a fog, when the passers-by looked like ghosts. When we had had a disagreement, we used to walk like three Chinamen, one behind the other, I last. We were only allowed to take the bus home; walking is such a fetish in England.

From the beginning the nuns fascinated me and I often thought it would be wonderful to become one of them. First of all I was convinced that when they died they went straight to Heaven, and then they wore such a romantic costume, though, unfortunately, very few of them wore it romantically. They all had an exaggerated humility, that made them round-backed, or did they perhaps try to disguise their bosoms to avoid providing temptation for any luckless man who passed through the convent? They were very kind to me, in spite of my eccentricities—perhaps they enjoyed them. I certainly made up by dramatic narration in the classes for my lack of study of dates and facts.

Towards the end of my first year, Fate provided what proved to be a signpost to my future in the apparently insignificant guise of the annual school play. That year a kind of potpourri of fairy tales and nursery rhymes—*The Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Cock Robin, Mother Hubbard* and so on—had been concocted for the performance by one of the nuns. When it came to my turn to be cast, difficulties arose. It was realised that I had a dramatic sense and could probably sustain a leading part, but with my strange un-English looks how could I appear as a fairy-tale heroine, or even as one of the Chorus of Fairies, much as I yearned to wear spangles and wings? It was a deadlock until the nun-authoroess had what was hailed as a brilliant idea.

“Marguerite has a singing voice,” she declared, “and always makes more noise than the others. We will turn Cock

Robin into the Town Crier for her and she can have a big bell and sing a rousing song—or perhaps two.”

And so it was settled. A lugubrious brown-paper costume with a large cap imitating a bird's head was made for me, while the other lucky girls were dressed up in pongee silk, velveteen and tarlatan of all the colours of my dreams. I became more and more depressed, particularly as the play was to be preceded by the prize-giving, and with my neglected home-work I was certain I would get no prize.

When the day came I was a mass of nerves, could not eat any breakfast and thought of nothing but my songs. Besides the Town Crier's aria—"Come ye all, both great and small, to the sound of the Crier's bell!"—the nuns at my own request were allowing me to sing, most unsuitably, "The lark now leaves his watery nest." My sisters teased mercilessly and called me Madame Patti, which I took quite seriously.

At the convent everything was excitement and the nuns were almost hysterical with importance and the party spirit. I felt ridiculous in my white spotted muslin dress with its green sash, that made me still more bilious-looking, and, catching sight of myself in a mirror, told my favourite nun that I was ill and must go home. She was understanding and said that was what artists always felt and I must behave like an artist and pull myself together and make a success. This put me on my mettle, and I went into the prize-giving room and watched my friends and enemies go up and receive their prizes from the heaps of gaily-bound books. Suddenly, towards the very end, to my utter amazement, I heard my name called, "Marguerite Alvarez—a Special Prize for Imagination." I could hardly believe my ears but walked with throbbing heart to the table and was presented with my prize—*The Life of Mary Magdalene*! It was a wonderful moment. Imagination was my real world, but I had always been reproached, and even punished, for living in it too

much, and now I was being rewarded. I was so happy that I put on my Cock Robin garb almost with love and determined to wear the brown paper like brocade.

When my cue came, I marched on to the stage and burst into song in a voice that made the whole room tremble. The audience treated me and my costume as a great joke, so I played up to them with action and gestures I had never used in rehearsal, and at the end of my part I was given an ovation by both the parents and nuns. It sealed my doom. From that moment I decided I would become a singer and nothing should stop me, and that night I prayed that Papa might lose his money and I be forced to earn my own living. When this actually happened I had a great feeling of guilt and have never since doubted the efficacy of prayer.

All that summer I drove my sisters nearly frantic singing from morning to night, playing my own accompaniments and then falling exhausted on to the bed. I saw myself standing on an enormous stage in a great opera-house with golden boxes and yellow plush curtains, through which I peeped to glimpse the audience, as I had peeped through the convent stage curtains, and I heard the tumultuous applause—for me alone—as they fell at the end of the performance. I kept these imaginings to myself until one day when Marie and Suzie were trying to persuade me to play tennis and I refused, saying I hated games.

"That's only because you're no good at them," said Marie.

"I'm good at other things," I retorted. "One day I'll surprise you. I'm going to be an artist—a famous singer probably."

They both burst out laughing. Marie cried: "What conceit!" and Suzie: "You're not good-looking enough," and that clinched matters.

I was damped but not permanently discouraged, and when one day Mamma asked me what kind of man I would like to marry when I grew up, I answered: "I don't think I want

to marry anyone. I want to be a singer. Can one do both?"

She smiled, stroked my hair and murmured: "Much may happen, darling. Wait."

Looking back I realise I never longed for marriage as did my sisters. My Latin blood gave me an instinctive understanding of the—in those days—veiled, unexplained mysteries that intrigue and torment youth, even when, as in my case, it has little natural curiosity. I was always a romantic, and it was only love that I longed for. I was intensely emotional, seeking from early adolescence the beauty and perfect completion that I felt must be waiting to be revealed to me in the ambience of men. Gradually I had to learn that I was, alas, the architect of my own desires. My spontaneous warmth was misunderstood and, with a physical appeal that I seem to have had unconsciously from youth, I attracted reactions that frightened and distressed me. I could win attention even away from my beautiful sisters, by a verbal brilliance that was really a mask for my inner shyness, but was considered witty and provocative and was misinterpreted as a daring I did not feel. Once when we were on holiday in Wales, I remember hearing, through the thin partition wall, Marie and Suzie begging Mamma to send me to the convent as a boarder until they were safely married. I was very hurt and could not understand why they wanted to get rid of me.

While I was still at school there was an incident that on a less sensitive nature would have made little impression but which left an indelible mark on mine. We were told one day that a very important diplomat from a foreign Embassy was coming with his wife to a big dinner-party, and to stay the night, at our home, and we were to be allowed to come in to the dining-room at the end of dinner. The next day was a Sunday, so we should also have lunch with the famous guests.

That evening we put on our party frocks—Marie's and Suzie's of accordion-pleated silk of turquoise-blue with geranium-red slippers, and mine of emerald-green velvet with dancing-sandals of bronze leather like enlarged South American beetles, that were my pride and joy—and went downstairs, excited and curious to see the great man.

He was tall and dark with a goatee beard and I thought him very interesting, but his look intimidated me, though I could not have explained why. We curtsied to all the guests, were offered strawberries dipped in sugar and vanilla, listened to a few grown-up banalities, curtsied again and ran up to bed.

"Did you like him?" my sisters asked.

"How could I? I don't know him," I answered, and they told me not to give myself airs.

Next day we all took great pains with our appearance before going down to lunch. I curled my hair until I looked like a Fiji Islander and Mamma nearly fainted when I came into the dining-room. But I felt irresistible and for some reason was wildly excited. I talked incessantly and the visitors encouraged me. Finally I asked if I might present Josephine to them. Permission was given and I flew upstairs. There she was, devouring a pile of vegetables I had given her to console her for being left alone. I draped her head with a black mantilla and put a pink rose under her collar and she looked just like a Marie Laurencin painting. Then I whispered to her to walk on her hind legs, took an ebony stick of Papa's and we entered the dining-room with a great air. The guests laughed and applauded and my happiness was complete.

After lunch was siesta time—my parents still kept to the Latin custom—and we all went to our rooms. I was too excited to rest and, getting up surreptitiously, slipped downstairs to the library. I loved that fascinating room and although Papa forbade us to go there alone, I often crept in

and enjoyed the books, particularly the ones we were not supposed to read. That day, I had just settled down in a big arm chair when I heard the door open. I jumped up guiltily and saw our visitor standing in the doorway. I wanted to run away, but he held out his arms to stop me. "Please, Monsieur, I must go upstairs," I said, inexplicably afraid.

"Not before I tell you how interesting I find you," he answered and took me in his arms.

I felt I could not struggle and lay there like a dead bird. Without speaking, looking with his strange eyes into mine, he smoothed back my hair, then kissed me on the lips as he touched with his hand my childish bosom. Terrified, I sprang from his arms like a young faun, rushed up to my room and threw myself on the bed, weeping hysterically. I felt I had committed a great sin. Would I perhaps have a child? I longed to talk to Mamma but did not dare. Miss Green found me sobbing and I said I felt ill and did not go downstairs again until the visitors had left.

Next day at the convent, I could not answer a single question after a sleepless night and must have looked so strange that my dear nun told me I could leave the class and sit in the garden for a while. I lay on the grass near a white rose-bush and sobbed again until the sunshine and the comfort that comes from the earth gradually soothed me.

Presently I saw a beautiful bee approach the loveliest of the roses. She swayed languorously on her slender stem as he seduced her, burrowing into her virginity and throwing his little back legs up in the air as he sucked avidly each drop of her honey. Then he flew away with satisfied indifference and never looked back. It gave me a strange feeling of disgust.

I returned to the classroom with swollen eyes and met the curious scrutiny of the other girls. They knew the answers to the lesson perfectly, but, I wondered, what was the answer to the lesson of the bee and the rose?



London



SOON after I was fourteen, I was parted from Mamma for the first time. I thought I could not bear it and would not be able to go on living without her, yet, had I but known, those months were to prove the key that unlocked the door to my career.

Papa's father, our Peruvian grandfather, when he died, had left to each of us one of the family gold-mines. These had never been worked, for it would have been costly to employ the necessary engineers and Papa had never had enough money to spare. When the family fortunes ran low, however, Mamma thought that they might prove a source of revenue and she decided to go out to Peru to investigate. She would have to go alone, as Papa was by now too neurasthenic to accompany her, and it was arranged that he would stay in Liverpool with Marie and Suzie, while I should be sent to London to stay with my second godfather, who held an important position at the Court of St. James's.

This godfather was a great diplomat and a great personality. He was very tall and handsome, mysterious, and walked in cloistered ways—metaphorically; in fact, he never walked at all, I thought to preserve his beautiful feet that were always immaculately shod in brown leather, like the glazed tongues one used to see at parties. His family adored and feared him and treated him like a king. His wife was quite unlike him, small, trim and very religious. They were always

studiously polite to one another, which I do not feel is a sign of love. There were six children, four girls and two boys, all very good-looking, except the eldest girl. They lived in a big, gaunt house in a fashionable part of London, and the girls were weekly boarders at a convent school.

Felipe, the elder son, was being educated by a tutor at home and was my companion while his sisters were away. He was very mature for his sixteen years, but sixteen in South America is as twenty-six in the Anglo-Saxon countries. He was already a great flirt and made me very conscious of my femininity. He would wait for me at the end of corridors and jump out and kiss me. His father did not trust him and was very strict with us both.

When I first came to London, I was ill from the agony of parting with Mamma. I was put to bed and lay for days with the blinds drawn, refusing to speak to anyone and having to be almost forced to eat—I who was so greedy. But time worked its spell and in a few weeks I had settled down and became one of the household.

It was not a gay life and I would have been very lonely without Felipe. I was sent out for endless walks with Seba, my godmother's South American maid, who wore her cast-off clothes and looked so smart that people walking behind would hurry to pass her, and, when they turned, would be horrified to see a coal-black face.

My godmother was never really fond of me, but from the beginning my godfather took a great interest, even in my clothes, and he became one of the greatest influences in my life. I was fascinated by and almost in love with him, though I was then too young to understand it.

Another very different influence, modest and temporary, came from his South American secretary, Señor Ernesto. He was extremely musical and would come to the drawing-room and play the piano when there was company, and everyone would talk at the top of their voices and drown his

playing. I had music lessons with him and confided to him my ambition to become a singer. He was very sympathetic and accompanied me in my songs, which I practised when everyone was out. He was terrified of my godfather, and would listen anxiously for the sound of the house-lift door opening, which was the signal of his return. He encouraged me greatly, but said my voice was too mature for my age, and I answered: "So is my heart."

One day, when I was feeling very courageous, I decided to talk to my godfather about my future, and if possible win his support. I knew it would be a hard struggle, for South Americans have a horror of public life for their women and exaggerate its dangers.

I found him in his study, sitting behind a huge Buhl desk with inkpots like gold soup-tureens and many quill pens of different colours, which gave warmth and gaiety to the austere room. As I advanced, he said: "Marguerite, you walk like a dancer; have you learned?"

"No, but I know many things I have not learned," I answered; "I wish singing were one." And then I told him of my determination.

He looked at me gravely and warned me, as I had expected, of the pitfalls and cruelties that beset the artist, but I cried, "Padrino, what is the use of an uneventful life? It must have contrast at least."

Then he said: "You know of course that no Latin will marry a singer?"

I hesitated, but answered: "If I have to stay unmarried, I will. I must sing. It is more important to me than a husband."

He seemed impressed, and in the end promised he would talk to my parents when Mamma returned, though he was sure it would be hopeless. I felt I had taken a step forward and from that day practised harder than ever.

When the girls came home for the holidays, I kept in the

background and felt unwanted again and missed Mamma more than ever. They were intelligent, gay and noisy. At table it was like a zoo with everyone ordering different dishes; there was rice at every meal.

Each night we went with all the household to my godmother's room to say the rosary with her. My godfather never came; he was not religious himself but insisted that everyone else should be. I was asked if I performed my duties towards our Church faithfully and was amazed; such things were never discussed at home. They sent me regularly to Confession with the other children and I was terrified, not knowing what to confess. I had not begun to live yet, except in my imagination, and the idea of sin is so individual. Ought I to confess my feeling for my godfather? I wondered.

At the end of the holidays, my godmother arranged for me to go back to the convent with her daughters. I hope it was because she thought it would be for my good and not because she resented the interest her husband and her son had shown in me.

Readjustment to the life of a new convent-world was difficult and I was never happy there. Mamma did not write often, and Marie and Suzie's letters were disturbing. They told me of the marvellous time they were having on their own and particularly of a grand fancy-dress ball, for which they had cut up some of Mamma's ball dresses of priceless brocade to make costumes; they had also dyed their hair bright red to save the expense of wigs!

In the "leisure hours" I walked by myself through the spacious convent grounds, perfectly kept by gardeners who were true artists and did much more from love than they were paid to do. I made friends with the eldest of them, a very old man with the eyes of a boy, a poet by nature, who told me he did his most successful gardening by moonlight.

He was Scottish and very fey and knew wonderful Highland tales of the spirits and fairies. When he died I imagined him lying at rest on the earth like the limb of some lovely silver-birch tree, felled by one of life's storms that had been too strong for him to withstand.

At last, one wonderful day, my godparents appeared unexpectedly and told me they had heard from Mamma that she was starting on her homeward journey. They said I could go back with them to London or stay another week or so with the nuns, as I preferred. Fate prompted me to choose to return with them.

I found the house in a state of feverish excitement. Preparations were in progress for a great reception to be given by my godparents to many famous and fashionable people. Madame Anderson, the celebrated Swedish soprano, had been engaged to sing and was coming specially from the Continent for the evening, with a well-known pianist to accompany her. There was going to be a magnificent dinner beforehand. How I longed to be one of the invited! But I would have to stand at the top of the stairs and peep over the banisters and see what I could and strain my ears to listen. Felipe was away, so I would not even have him to intercept some choice morsels from the dinner-table.

The much-anticipated day brought with it a real, old-fashioned pea-soup fog. One could not see the houses opposite. It got into one's nostrils and made one's eyes smart as though one had sniffed pepper. As the hours sped on it did not lift, and there was grave anxiety in the house.

"How will Madame Anderson get here?" Ernesto asked me. "She'll never turn up. It's a pity you aren't older or you could have sung in her place."

I stared at him with eyes like saucers.

"What a marvellous idea! It'd be a chance to show what I can do. I could disguise myself, Ernesto," I cried. "If she doesn't come, I'll do it!"

He was terrified.

"No, no, you couldn't! Everyone would be furious. Think of your parents. And what would His Excellency say? I'd be dismissed."

"I won't tell him it was your idea," I promised. "Stay here and I'll show you something." And I left him and raced upstairs.

I found Seba alone—everyone else was busy with the preparations—and I used all my powers of persuasion.

"Seba darling," I coaxed, "swear on your soul not to tell anyone; it's my greatest secret. I want to put on Madrina's emerald-green taffeta dress with the black Chantilly lace and the endless frills. Let me into her wardrobe-room, please."

"Are you crazy?" she exclaimed. "Whatever for?"

"I've no time to explain, but it's the biggest chance I may ever have. My whole future may depend on it! Don't refuse me, Seba darling. Please! Please!"

She stared at me.

"Please! please!" I repeated, my heart in my eyes and voice.

She stared again, then slowly began to search for a key and I knew I had won the day.

I tiptoed behind her and she unlocked the door of the room to which no one but she had access, where were cloistered my godmother's dresses, furs, jewels and perfumes. She went in and I followed breathlessly. I saw the lovely taffeta dress hanging there, and before she could stop me, I took it down, feverishly ripped off my own frock, got into it and almost hypnotised her into hooking me up from top to bottom while I held my breath all the time, for I was much bigger than my godmother. Then I begged for a long black lace mantilla, a Spanish comb, a lace fan and some old red flowers.

"Real ones?" she asked.

"No, artificial," I replied impatiently.

She gave me some red roses and I promptly dabbed them with saliva and rouged my cheeks and lips. I had never seen this done, but it gave me a most professional feeling. Then I pinned up my hair, pushed the Spanish comb into the coils, wrapped the mantilla round me and flew downstairs again to Ernesto.

He stared at me aghast.

"Marguerite," he cried, "it's fantastic! You look twenty-two and beautiful. I wouldn't have known you!"

"Thank you," I laughed, dropping a curtsy. "Now, look! When I put this fan in front of my mouth and eyes would anyone recognise me?"

"Hardly," he answered. "I think you can risk it."

"I mean to. Now go and find out if there is news of Madame Anderson."

He disappeared and came back stuttering with excitement; a telephone message had been received that Madame was in despair but she would not be able to reach London in time. I jumped up as if I had been shot, with mingled sensations of joy and fear.

"We must go through the songs!" I cried and almost dragged him up to the fourth floor, where there was a piano isolated from the rest of the house. I felt delirious and sang better than I had ever sung before. Ernesto became quite reckless.

"I don't care if this costs me my job," he cried with—for him—daredevil abandon. "And look, the fog is lifting a little; the guests will be able to come."

We did not go down again until we calculated the dinner would be over and everyone well settled in the drawing-room.

Then I put on the lace mantilla, lifted the waves of green taffeta and descended the staircase, feeling I had already conquered the world.

Outside the drawing-room door, we hesitated. We could

hear the gay chatter of innumerable voices and occasional cascades of laughter. My courage almost failed me. I turned to look at Ernesto, dressed all in black with his patent-leather hair fitting like a bathing-cap over his low forehead. He was trembling, folding and unfolding the music, blowing through it and twiddling the corners. This enraged me and drove out fear.

"Don't do that!" I whispered fiercely. "Don't you know it's my father's music and sacred?" And with that I swished open my fan, held it in front of my eyes as I had rehearsed, flung wide the double doors and entered.

I was petrified again as I saw a sea of faces turning to stare at me, and above them all my tall godfather standing rooted to the spot as though he had seen a ghost. I longed to run away, but Ernesto gave me his hand to lead me on to the platform that had been specially put up for the evening. Then he slipped on to the piano stool and started the introduction to the first song. Everyone became silent. I could only stand with as grand a manner as I could muster, as I had seen the artists do in Mamma's drawing-room, and wait. When the moment came I gave my first phrase with such style that I could not believe it was I, and suddenly became oblivious of everyone and completely hypnotised by my own courage and emotion. I sang four songs, and at the end there was great applause and approving smiles and raising of eyebrows in admiration.

As I was about to leave the platform, not quite sure how I was going to get off it, the world went black as I saw my godfather advancing towards me. "He's going to expose me!" I thought, but instead, with a look of absolute non-recognition that almost deceived me, he kissed my hand and asked if I would give an encore as everyone desired it. I wanted to weep; I was so happy. I sang the lovely words that had so inspired my father when he left Peru for Paris as a very young man:

“When I was leaving my native land
I had not the courage to say goodbye to those I loved.
So laden with misery was my soul,
Even the sun refused to appear in the heavens
And the stones were weeping blood.”

More applause. I curtsied and Ernesto helped me from the platform. It seemed to take an hour to walk from the room. I felt a fatigue as though I had been beaten, and yet an immense relief; I had delivered the child. But the consequences like a great vulture seemed hovering round my head, and I fell on my bed without even taking off the mantilla and sobbed myself to sleep. I had terrifying dreams of all the things I feared most, and my godfather was in them all as a dozen different personalities.

Next morning I woke with a scream as though somebody had stabbed me in the heart. Seba was at the door to say my godparents wanted me in the library. I rushed to the glass to see the change I felt there must be in myself. There were circles under my eyes and I had a haunted look. I did not know what dress to wear and just threw on my clothes and went downstairs. I wished I could use the fan again to hide my face.

I opened the library door as timidly as though I were going to steal something, and faced my godparents. Ernesto was there too, sitting at the desk, crouched with fear; he looked like a small fountain-pen that had been dropped by some untidy child, and I wanted to take him in my arms and say: “This is not your fault; I am grateful to you beyond words.”

There was such a strange look in my godfather’s eyes that I was a little reassured and felt he had in a way understood what I had done, but was afraid to show his understanding. My godmother, on the other hand, looked very severe and told me sternly and with a certain pleasure that I had dis-

graced my family and completely failed in good taste, and demanded how I had dared to borrow without her permission her dress and possessions. Of course she considered my having painted my cheeks and lips a mortal sin in itself. Her religious fanaticism made her bigoted and a little cruel towards me and I knew she felt that her husband was being too lenient in not saying the things they had rehearsed together.

All of a sudden I could stand it no more and my South American temper got the better of me.

"What is this great crime I have committed?" I almost shouted. "I sang my best and helped you out, when the artist you had engaged could not come. Is that such a crime? And I had to wear your dress, Madrina. I had to disguise myself. It gave me courage. I felt I was someone else."

She looked puzzled and waved me aside. My godfather did not say a word, but I was sure he was not so angry as he was pretending to be. The upshot of it all was that there would have to be consultation with my parents as soon as Mamma returned, to bring me to my senses, for of course they would agree that the stage was no place for a girl of my birth. "What nonsense," I thought, but did not say so.

On the way back to my room I met Felipe, who had just come home. I told him all that had happened and he was sweet and sympathetic and said: "Of course it wasn't a crime. Don't take it so seriously."

"But, Felipe," I cried, "I am a different person. It was like a baptism for a new life. I saw the people and wasn't conscious of them. I was climbing a ladder of iridescent ropes. It was dangerous but intoxicating. I just can't explain."

"If only I'd been there," he sighed. "I've longed to see you. I've missed you so much."

His expressive eyes said more than his words, and I had a sudden terror that he was going to tell me that he loved me. I put my hand on his mouth and said: "Please don't say any

more." I was very fond of him, but that was all. He was like a brother, and the excitement of the unknown is such a necessary element in love. He had an undisciplined heart like all South Americans, and years later he fell in love with a beautiful, hard English girl, who teased him and played with him and took a joy in bruising his sensitive, ardent nature. He went on a sea trip with her and her family and, always fearing she did not love him as he loved her, one night, after a violent scene of jealousy, he threw himself overboard. It took me years to recover from this tragedy and the feeling that I should have come nearer to him and perhaps have helped to save him from himself. His family wore mourning for ten years. The South American races have an amazing reverence for their dead, and much of this remains in me. Each time I have lost someone I love it has been my own peculiar rehearsal of death. I can never become accustomed to its mystery, and the healthy attitude of the Nordic peoples towards it makes me feel that the roots of their loves are not from great trees and can be too easily covered or destroyed.

The days that followed my "crime" were a true penance to me. I felt ill at ease with my surroundings and longed more than ever for Mamma's return.

At last a telegram came announcing her arrival at Southampton, and I had never known such joy. My godparents told me that they would go down to meet her without me. I was broken-hearted but realised it was to give them the opportunity to discuss me and thought it wiser to say nothing.

Next day I sat by the window, watching every vehicle outside, almost too excited to breathe. Would Mamma notice this something that had been born in me? I wondered. I feared and yet longed to assert what I now knew indubitably to be my destiny.

The door-bell rang. I did not wait, but rushed down the steps into the street and never will I forget Mamma's beauty as I saw her for the first time, as it were, anew. Her hat was made all of flowers, and her long black silk cape lined with sable made her look like a lovely painting. We both cried out with joy and our faces were wet with tears as we flew into each other's arms. I longed to be alone with her and talk and talk, but there had to be dinner first, where for the first time I played with my food and could not eat.

When the long meal was over I went with her to her room and begged her to tell me everything my godparents had said. At first she wanted to avoid any discussion and began opening little gifts she had brought from Peru, beautiful Inca jewels in satin boxes of every colour. I ran to the glass to try them on, and pushing up my hair and making it into a large bun, I said, "Now you see you wouldn't recognise me either! The minute I put on something lovely or out of the ordinary I become an artist."

She took me in her arms.

"Darling," she said, "it would be impossible to influence your father. He wants you to marry and has chosen your fiancé."

I became white and terrified.

"My fiancé?" I whispered.

"I think you will like him very much," she went on soothingly. "He is coming from Peru to the Embassy in London in three months, and you will meet him then."

I knew this would mean the most horrible discussions with Papa, and my heart ached for her. I felt limp with misery and longed to weep in her arms, but knew it was not the moment. She kissed me and told me to go and pack my clothes, as we were leaving for home next day.


My heart was torn between the joy of being reunited and returning with her, and the sorrow of parting from my godfather, the children and, perhaps most of all, from Ernesto,

who with his tremulous personality had given me courage and strength; I knew I should need them both. I would have to take up family life again, a stranger almost, and await the arrival of this man who had been chosen for me and who, I was utterly determined, should not interfere with my future.

Mamma too was full of resolution. Her journey seemed to have given her health and new vigour. She had been enchanted at seeing again the land where she had become a young bride, and at meeting again many of the friends she had met then. But the family gold-mines, it transpired, had unfortunately been appropriated by others and the papers proving our ownership had mysteriously disappeared—I wondered guiltily if Josephine has devoured them in one of her many forays—so our hopes of a golden future had faded. They turned to green when Mamma was forced to sell her emeralds and we lived on the proceeds for a long period, known in the family annals as Emerald Time.



Liverpool

 ON OUR arrival home, Marie and Suzie greeted us, looking almost unrecognisable with their brilliantly dyed red hair. All the furniture in the drawing-room had been changed round for the benefit, as they explained, of the many parties they had given. Mamma, without commenting on their hair, began replacing chairs and tables before she took off her hat. Papa emerged from his library and expressed surprise at the rearrangement; he had not noticed any difference in the furniture. He took the loss of the gold-mines philosophically, saying that it would probably in any case have been too expensive to have them worked. At dinner he looked at me curiously, and remarked that he found me changed. I seized the opportunity to say that I was, and to try and explain how my success at my godfather's party had given me the absolute conviction that all I now wanted in life was to have a career as a singer. He laughed sarcastically and said that in Spain the fruit-vendors had voices as good as, and better than, mine. I was furious, but before I could reply Mamma intervened hurriedly and changed the subject.

It was now decided that economies in the family budget must somehow be made. Various means were discussed, Papa's gambling not being mentioned. At last Ben came to the rescue. He had recently passed out with honours from the Jesuit College in Bath and through Mamma's influence had been named Chancellor of the Peruvian Consulate in

Liverpool, in succession to her interpreter-friend of the past. Marie and Suzie had almost finished their time at the convent, and he offered, if they left immediately, to coach them in their weakest subjects and to undertake entirely the rest of my education.

Our parents gratefully accepted the offer, but we trembled when we were told of it. We knew Ben was a perfectionist in everything and we would have no loopholes of escape as at the convent. He bought an old oak desk and a pair of eye-glasses with plain lenses, and for the lessons wore the latter with a Paisley dressing-gown to impress us and make us feel he was a stranger. We were congealed with fear, and even Marie, who was his twin soul, hardly dared address him once the glasses were on his nose. He would not join us any more in our games for fear of losing his prestige, and even Mamma, if she came into the schoolroom, was politely led to the door after having had her hand ceremoniously kissed. He taught us more of history, literature and science in six months than I remember learning in all my time at the convent, but I was often reduced to tears in the painful process.

The monthly Musical Evenings and the young men, friends of Ben, who came to them, were our consolation and the bright spot of our lives. I took part in them now as a singer and Papa even composed a song especially for me. It contained only one word, "Ki-ki-li-ki," an Indian love-word with different meanings, of which he would never tell me any. As an encore I would repeat my Cock Robin triumph, "The lark now leaves his watery nest," and sometimes reduce the audience to tears.

To one of these Evenings Ben brought a very attractive young Greek, a rich businessman, but an artist at heart. He was about thirty (which seemed to us very old), good-looking and intelligent, with an enigmatic smile. Ben presented him to us. It was love at first sight on my part. Youth can

love with maturity and its love has the added strength of not knowing why.

Alexander—that was his name—seemed interested in me and told me he had a studio in the town, and before leaving he asked Mamma if she would permit him to paint my portrait. She was surprised and, I felt, a little annoyed that he had not chosen Marie, but he said that my expression when singing had moved him so much that he wanted to try and capture it on canvas. She consented to my sitting for him once a week with Miss Green in attendance, which spoiled my delight.

In spite of this, the sittings became my paradise. There were always flowers for me and boxes of my favourite chocolates, and he would talk to me as though I were grown-up. I felt as if I wore a white satin gown with a long train and gardenias tucked in odd places like Mamma's, which she had described to us. Sometimes he would tactfully draw Miss Green into the conversation, and it enraged me; I wanted to be able to ignore her on these visits, where I was a reigning queen. Everyone spoke of his admiration for me, but, of course, with such a difference in our ages any tie would have been impossible. I was jealous of him beyond reason, and when I heard of his dancing at a ball and holding other women in his arms I felt I had been robbed of something that was peculiarly mine.

Suddenly one day he told me that from childhood he had been engaged by his parents to his cousin in Greece and he would soon be going back there for their marriage. A black cloud descended and blotted out my sun. I made a super-human effort not to burst into tears and just sat without uttering a word. Afterwards I refused to go on with the sittings or to see him again. He was very hurt but finished the picture from memory. It was a study of my inner self and expressed suffering, drama and emotion beyond my years.

When he went away he did not forget me. At first he sent from Greece exotic fruits and preserves, and later, when I was in Brussels, beautifully bound scores of the operas I had to sing. I never answered, but his personality left a perfume in my life that has not evaporated to this day.

Very soon after Alexander's departure, while I was still bruised and listless, Mamma told me that Francisco Perez, the chosen fiancé, was arriving in Liverpool at any moment and she hoped that our meeting would really determine my future. I answered that my present unhappiness had shown me that my feelings could easily destroy me and that for the career I had chosen I would have to master them. She ignored this and only replied: "*Tout passe, chérie.*" But I wanted to keep my suffering, for it was all he had left me of himself. The idea of marrying anyone with whom I was not in love nauseated me and I was absolutely decided that not even Mamma should make me change my resolution.

There was great excitement in the house about the coming visit. Everyone seemed interested in my future, but I wanted to make my own. Marie and Suzie were already being courted by two eligible brothers, but were not averse to meeting the young Peruvian. A dinner-party was arranged for the night of his arrival.

The evening came. I took no pains with my appearance, to Mamma's consternation. But in spite of myself I was curious and when the door-bell rang loudly my pulse quickened. Doris barked madly. The maid in her excitement put on her cap back to front, looking like Queen Victoria in her widowhood. I heard the front door open and peeped over the stairs. There he was, not tall, to my disappointment, and with more breeding than good looks. I ran to my sisters' room with the report. They were still putting the finishing touches to their beauty. They told me I was looking my

worst and supposed I had done it on purpose to be interesting. I denied this violently, as it was fundamentally true; I was enjoying my unhappiness in a way and wanted it to be noticed.

We all went down together to the drawing-room, where our parents were making the visitor feel at home with Peruvian *hors-d'œuvres* and glasses of pisco. He looked rather taken aback when he saw the three of us enter, and more so when he was introduced to me. Dinner improved matters. He showed a lively sense of humour, which immediately interested me, and I suddenly came to life and started a verbal duel with him, in which Marie and Suzie took no part. After dinner they came into their own, when we played table tennis—then called ping-pong—at which they were experts and I a disaster.

From that evening a more-than-friendship developed between Francisco and me and I grew very fond of him, but was never carried away. After some time, he told me he was in love with me and it was tacitly assumed by my parents and sisters that we would marry, but I put up a secret mental resistance and there was no official engagement. When I talked to him of my determination to make a career he never openly dissuaded me; I think he imagined it was only a caprice and I would never carry it through. But I was now more resolved than ever, because I had the added incentive of a real need to earn money. Emerald Time was coming to an end. Papa was far from well and took to his bed on the slightest provocation, including unpaid bills. Ben's diplomatic training was expensive and my sisters were too occupied with their gaities and love affairs to read the writing on the wall. I wanted to be able to give Mamma all the luxuries she had been accustomed to and was so bravely doing without, and I had—and still have—a horror of debts, for which Papa had a passion. I could not discuss these family affairs with Francisco. He was too aloof and probably

my parents' generous hospitality gave him a false idea of our situation.

One day Mamma told me she had been asked to stay with some friends in Paris and they had also invited me. I was enchanted. I knew their daughter was studying drama at the Conservatoire and I secretly determined that she should help me to obtain an audition there in the hope that I might be accepted as a pupil in singing. There had been perpetual promises that I should visit the City of Wonders, which I knew so well through Mamma's eyes, but they had always faded like a mirage. This time I would go.

We left on a winter's morning. I wore a black felt hat with a bunch of holly under the brim and a chenille tassel, of which I was inordinately proud, but it did not stand up well to the gale that we met in the Channel. Mamma was very ill, as was nearly everyone on board; it became like a hospital ship. I was starry-eyed, observant of everything and too excited to pay attention to the strange feelings in my solar plexus. As we set foot on French soil, Mamma recovered miraculously and even remembered to ask if I had kept some of the chicken sandwiches for her *déjeuner*.

We reached Paris in the evening, and the beauty of the city in the pale green, frosty light was indescribable. The air was fragrant with the smell of violets and the little charcoal braziers with chestnuts roasting at street-corners. Large snowflakes like cotton-wool balls, thrown from the heavens by playful angels, descended, refusing to melt, and the horses were covered with caparisons of sparkling white. The shop windows were unimaginably beautiful, the toyshops above all. Smiling dolls, adorned with jewelry and furs, walking and talking, were greeted by Punchinellos of every colour with tinkling bells and the faces of French barristers. Cats and dogs waltzed together and large screens of sugar-sticks and toffee-apples with mechanical birds and butterflies fluttering in and out made a fantastic background for this world of toys.

We drove in a *fiacre* with an old coachman, whose back was so wide I could see nothing in front of us, and all too soon reached our friends' apartment in the Bois de Boulogne. They gave us a wonderful welcome and I was blissfully happy until at dinner Mamma mentioned that I had discovered I had a voice and wished to become a singer. It seemed to cast a blight on the atmosphere. Our hosts were so ambitious for their daughter that they could not tolerate the idea that I too might have talent, and they asked rather sarcastically if I would sing there and then for them without accompaniment. This I did out of sheer defiance and they were not impressed, advising me to make marriage my career. Mamma was furious and we discussed their behavior far into the night.

Choune, the daughter, was more sympathetic, and next day I told her in confidence about the audition I wanted to have at the Conservatoire and asked if she could arrange it for me. She said I could go with her and meet the Director, and I was delighted.

When I entered the great building, full of confidence and hope, it was an utterly unexpected world—a finishing school and not a training-ground, as she should have warned me. The students appeared to be sophisticated artists and were made up, in spite of their youth, as though about to go on the stage. Next to them, I felt absurdly naïve and inadequate; it robbed me of much of my courage.

The Director seemed uninterested, but told me there would be an open audition in two days' time, and, with less confidence, I entered my name. Then he sent me to one of the *répétiteurs* to go over the song I would sing; I had chosen Gluck's aria, "O, del mio dolce ardor." The *répétiteur* told me that, although I had a lovely voice, I needed to be trained to compete in the audition, but advised me to try since I had gone thus far, and not to be disappointed if I failed.

At two o'clock on the fateful day I went alone to the Conservatoire, telling no one but Choune. When I arrived, she

appeared from nowhere to wish me luck. The other competitors were all accompanied by fathers or lovers. I sat apart like a leper until I was called. I was almost the last and had begun to hope they had forgotten my name.

When I heard it, I jumped to my feet and was ushered into a large hall to meet innumerable bald heads and patronising smiles. The accompanist played the opening chords of my song. I felt that death would have been a glad release, but gave all that was left in me to give and awaited the verdict. There was a moment's silence, then the judges said: "Thank you," and I was shown out.

I had promised to meet Choune for coffee after the ordeal and supposed I had better go. Just as I was leaving, I saw the young *répétiteur* hurrying towards me. He said he had come to tell me the result before I heard it officially. I had failed. Vainly I tried not to show my despair. He told me sympathetically I must not attach too much importance to this. It was lack of training and influence and not of talent, he said, that had defeated me, and he was sure that one day I would succeed. He advised me to try and enter the Conservatoire in Brussels, where beginners were accepted. I thought he was only making the suggestion from kindness, but I did not forget it.

His encouragement consoled me a little, and the charm of Paris, as I hurried to meet Choune, almost completed the cure. I looked into the wonderful shops and with renewed optimism decided what I would buy when I returned to France as a famous singer.

Choune was waiting for me under the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli and I shall always remember the mingled smells of vanilla and Parma violets that greeted our nostrils as we entered the *salon de thé* with its white-and-gold furniture and little round tables, at which were seated on the painted, upright chairs women, both conventional and unconventional, all watching the door with the same expression. In-

trigue was in the air, and one sensed the many futures that were made and broken in those rendezvous of pleasure. Choune was sympathetic and philosophical and to comfort me completely treated me to several of the marvellous cakes, whose names, as well as their heavenly taste, delighted me—*feuilles de palmiers*, *babas*, *allumettes*, *frangipane* and *petits bateaux*.

When we got back to the apartment, I was artificially gay and sang at the top of my voice while dressing for dinner. Mamma said it had been a long afternoon without me, but hoped I had enjoyed myself with Choune. I turned my back and changed the subject.

The next day she and I spent entirely at the Louvre, an introduction to its wonders for which I am eternally grateful; she talked of the pictures and statues so brilliantly and made them live for me. Afterwards, we sat at a café and decided that one day we would have a home together in Paris, and I thank God that, years later, I was able to bring this to pass. She told me she had had a letter from Papa about his health that worried her, and she felt we ought to return home at once. I was desolate, for Paris had already seduced me, but we left in two days.

The family were delighted to see us back so soon. My sisters bombarded me with questions innumerable, and Josephine had a piece of mistletoe under her collar. Francisco had sent flowers to welcome us. Papa seemed in robust health, and I knew the letter had just been a snare to lure Mamma home.

When we had settled down again I told Ben in confidence about my setback at the Conservatoire and begged him to use his influence with our parents to let me train seriously, if possible in Brussels. I explained it was not just egoism that urged me on; I had a premonition I must make money for the family's—and above all Mamma's—future. He said that was *his* duty, and I replied that I knew he would do all

he could—as he always did—but I knew too the sacrifice it would mean in his career. Eventually he agreed to support me.

All through that spring and early summer I brought pressure to bear to wear down the family opposition. Arguments flew backwards and forwards like shuttlecocks. Our friends in Liverpool rallied round me; my singing at the Musical Evenings had evidently made more impression than I had realised. As a trump card, I slyly suggested that if I went to Brussels I could take other classes besides singing, and complete my rather spasmodic cultural education; this proved a master-stroke against Papa's defeatism. Finally, I wrote to my godfather in London, pleading for his co-operation, and it came in a wonderful letter. He said that although he disapproved of what I had done on that famous evening in his house, the guests who had been present were still talking of the unknown singer, and I had made him realise I had talent which should be encouraged. If my parents would let me go to Brussels, he offered to provide financial help.

This turned the scales in my favour. Decisions were suddenly made like lightning. It was agreed that I should go to Brussels in the autumn, and before I left, Mamma and I would have a holiday together, while Marie and Suzie stayed behind and looked after Papa and Ben.

Immediately, a terror seized me of what I had won and of what lay before me. I felt I had suddenly been thrust into an express train, heading for I knew not where. Suppose I were another Alice on the way to Wonderland, and my dream as hers crumbled like a pack of cards? But whatever the destination, I knew that now there could be no turning back.

It was a strange, short summer with Mamma by the sea that we both loved. There was a horrible sadness in me at the thought of leaving her and all the things I loved so sincerely and deeply. I wished I could take her with me and I wanted

to weep and say: "Don't give me permission. Don't let me go. I am frightened."

We walked for miles by the ocean, hand in hand—she with her hair streaming down her back, looking beautiful and resigned, and there was a complete union and understanding between us. She asked: "What are you going to say to Francisco?" and I told her I did not owe him any explanation. I had only half-said I would marry him and I must express what I had within me before I could think of becoming a wife.

When we returned home, all things seemed to take on an added importance, as they would if one were told one were soon going to die. Marie was preparing to go to London and live with her rich godparents. There would be polo ponies, personal maids, Royalty, champagne and amateur theatricals, for fun and perhaps a future career—in fact, the whole gamut of that worldly life that seemed to attract her.

Suzie was now engaged to a charming squire, and in my heart I was a little in love with him too, which made life interesting but also sad. The preparation of her trousseau was a strange thorn in my heart. I was delighted for her sake and as helpful as I could be, but I was jealous of him and felt that he loved me too in quite a different way—only through his eyes, for his gallantry would never have allowed him to be in any way untrue to my sister. She proved through the years to be the right companion for him. They had the same tastes and both loved music in rather a foster-mother way. They adored sport, and fought madly over politics. Nature too was a great interest to them. He knew the name of every bird and told me their habits, but, by the strangest contradiction, he was also a great sportsman, who loved shooting even more than other sports. He was a fine lawyer too; but I think that later, when he became a judge, to have to condemn men to prison and, though rarely, to their death, killed his great heart. He died much too soon.

When he was ill, in his garden, in the shadow of the great

trees, we discussed the problems of the world and our own under their calm and silent protection. The beauty of the moss bank on which we sat and the smell of the earth made all things seem trivial, except the charity that entered our hearts through the perfect harmony of those glorious surroundings.

How different it all seems now. How much blood has been spilt to make a better world, and how infinitely better the world seemed then. There was gallantry in everything. People were paid to serve but they did it with pleasure. Men cheated but in mystery. There was no such washing of intimate linen in public as is accepted to-day. How can people try to destroy all reason for loving the creatures they married? It seems to me incongruous. I can always see a reason for loving the people I was in love with, and the past of those affairs is like a beautiful cemetery. I return in spirit to put water on the flowers that were once so perfumed, and to pick out of the earth the weeds and stones and indiscreet worms. There is nothing ugly about anything that has been truly sincere. It may fade, but it can never die.

The wedding was a great success. My sister, having a healthy nature, was cheerful, with no regret at leaving home nor any fears of what the future might bring. How I envied her this "field flower" attitude towards the creature she loved. No grave forebodings as I would have had, or the fear that he might tire of her, or that the next night might not be so glorious as the one that had passed. How strange that three creatures like myself and my sisters should be born from the same parents and yet be so totally different! Love to me has always brought drama and forebodings besides moments of inexplicable joy. One insures one's jewels and one's possessions for fear of losing them; why cannot one insure one's heart?

I began to prepare my wardrobe for leaving home. Mamma chose the most subdued and rather "uniformed"

clothes. My underlinen was of the best quality but so thick that it reminded me of sail-cloth, and the torchon lace which adorned it was like tender string; no silk stockings, of course, no feathers in my hats, no striking colours—only a precious fur coat made of squirrel, lined with chartreuse satin, and a little fur hat to match. As I was packing, I promised myself one day to buy a large ostrich feather to nestle in my neck and be worn at a jaunty angle. I knew Mamma thought my personality too colourful for me to be allowed to wear the clothes I would have chosen, but, when I had finished my studies, I would be at an age and in a position to choose. In fact, I would be a singer and that, to her, meant eccentricity in the worst and best sense of the word.

Everything I put in my trunk seemed to weigh a thousand tons. My heart was in mourning, for I felt I was burying my past. Yet the strength of art was so potent in me that it gave me the courage to leave my home, my family, my playmates—even Josephine—and all I had known from childhood, to face the world.

One day, when the shadows were falling, Mamma and I were sitting, surrounded by hyacinths and dogs, in front of the huge fireplace filled with burning logs of vivid colours. They had been part of some valiant ship and I hoped had belonged to a merchant vessel bringing spices and a strange cargo from the East. As we sat there, my mother told me that, much as she would miss me, she was truly anxious for me to begin my career, because for her it would be a wonderful experience and would console her for what she herself had not been able to do. I threw my arms around her and said: "Dearest, it will be you singing through me. I shall be only the instrument. You will be the inspiration."

The time slipped away on wings and the day of parting came all too soon. On the last morning I wandered, blinded by tears, through the house and every corner of the garden and said goodbye to all my loved friends—the animals, the

flowers, the pictures, the furniture—all that spelled childhood to me, for I could be a child no longer.

Mamma took me to the station. I longed for Ben to be with us to give me courage and to stay with her; it would have made the parting easier. I begged her not to wait until the train had started, and so, after a long embrace, from which neither of us felt we could ever tear ourselves, she gently unclasped my arms that clung to her and walked away without a backward glance.

As I saw her loved figure growing smaller and disappearing into the distance, my urge to jump from the carriage was so strong that I covered my face with my hands to hide her from sight, feeling that the blood had frozen in my heart.

Then the train steamed slowly out of the station. Familiar landmarks vanished, one by one, and the unknown faced me. This was the beginning I had prayed for. What, I wondered feverishly, would be the end?



PART TWO

The Student





Brussels



IT HAD been decided that I should live in a convent in Brussels, as my parents thought it would be too risky for me to be alone in a *pension*. I would take classes there to finish my education, and later go to the Conservatoire, if I were found worthy of becoming a pupil. A friend of Papa's had discovered that a man, who lived in Brussels and whom he knew slightly, would be travelling by my train, and after having enquired about his credentials, he made arrangements for him to chaperon me. The nuns would meet me at the Brussels station and take me to the convent.

The chaperon turned out to be a kind and amiable little man, with eyes so small that one wondered why God had not made them into one in the middle of his forehead; it would at least have been original. When we went to the restaurant car, to my horror he paid for his dinner without attempting to pay for mine, and opened a shabby little grey purse that looked like a dead mouse. I lost all interest in him. It seemed so mean for a man to count his money before paying and to look for tips among the smallest change he could find in the purse.

When we arrived in Brussels, the people who travelled with us seemed stunned to see me met by two young nuns, one with large spectacles like church-windows on her nose, the other like some ethereal lily that had strayed from the church, too young to have made up her mind to renounce

the savour of this world. She was a lay sister and did the scrubbing of the floors, the polishing of the furniture, the mending—in fact, all the menial things that the young apprentice nuns have to do before taking the veil, as all things, however humble, if done well, are serving God. The other nun was strict with me immediately and told me I must realise that my artistic life would have to conform with convent hours and regulations. I answered that I was sure I would be very happy, and she would be surprised to hear that I had wavered between undertaking a career and becoming a nun. She looked at me with suspicion and one side of her mouth went up like a scale. I remembered a certain dog that had bitten me as a child with almost the same expression, and felt I would have to be wary.

We got into a very musty *fiacre* with a dear old coachman with the most civilised eyes I had seen since leaving home; it seemed already more than a month ago. I was trying to be as poised as I could, and this stopped me from weeping.

We reached the convent and I was ushered into the reception hall with floors so brilliantly polished that, looking down, I could see my nose was shining, but did not dare to take out my mirror, as I felt I was being watched through various little windows and door-cracks. I sat erect and motionless. My heart was thumping so hard that I had to put my hand on it to stop showing how frightened I was. Had I had enough money, I would have flown back to the station to return to the glorious harbour of my mother's arms and breast.

The Reverend Mother entered with great majesty. She held out both her hands and said that I was welcome and under the roof of Our Lord. I answered that I knew what a privilege it was to be allowed to finish my studies in the convent. She smiled and said that first I must rest from my journey; I felt that rest would never come to me again.

The young lay sister was told to take me to my little

cubicle, and when I saw it I thought I would have to lie outside until I had dieted sufficiently to enter. I had brought too many home souvenirs with me and did not know where I could put the picture of Mamma and my precious knick-knacks, all so necessary to me. At one time I had even thought of bringing Josephine. I laughed secretly to think of the consternation of the nuns on seeing me arrive at the station with a goat.

When the nun, with her strange expression of not seeing me, came back to take me down to the refectory, I was petrified. I peered into the tiny looking-glass in my purse and saw I was pale green. My dramatic spirit helped me to cross the imposing threshold and to walk with dignity across the slipperiest floor I have ever trodden. I was seated at the left of a nun who was serving the most awful coffee. It was pure sand, and had some flower-seeds been put in it a strange weed would have grown overnight. Bread was the only comforting thing—no butter, just black jam called “syrup of pears.” I had never seen people eat so much, but not for the first five minutes, as they were all staring at me. Dressed in black, I must have appeared very strange to them, as I did to myself, and to hide my embarrassment I just looked down at my plate.

The nun asked if I liked coffee and why I had not drunk mine. I told her I did not feel at all hungry or thirsty. At every word I said, all the heads bobbed up. Suddenly, a strange noise like timid castanets was heard all over the room. I looked quickly round, and saw that the nun had a wooden instrument like a black lobster in her right hand. This was the sign to rise and we walked out two by two, I feeling utterly ridiculous. I had no uniform and did not intend to wear one. We were ushered into a small room smelling delightfully of candles and religion, and I became calmer.

The door opened with the greatest silence and, when I

looked up, there was another nun with two girls, one rather attractive and the other so unattractive that she fascinated me. They were to sit with me and acquaint me with the different things I was supposed to do and say. The nun sat at the back of me, as psychoanalysts do, and it had a strange effect. I became horribly nervous and talked so much and made so many jokes that the girls were in convulsions. The nun said I must be more serious, and asked what classes I wished to attend. I told her, literature, poetry and everything related to beauty, and she added: "Religion, of course." I said that was beauty too, if it was felt naturally, and she pretended not to hear and looked shocked.

How I would have loved to have Josephine in my cubicle that night. She could have lain on top of my feet, which were terribly cold, as no hot-water bottles were allowed. Is there anything sinful in a hot-water bottle and the perfect comfort it gives? I needed it so badly on my heart, and seemed to sleep wide-awake, conscious of the snores and whisperings around me. Fortunately, the cubicle had a small curtain of opaque cotton smelling of laundry-soap and nobody could see me, but through it I felt the vibrations of curiosity about the strange girl who had come to study music and literature and art.

At dawn, a nun made me get up and wash my face with icy water. I could hardly brush my teeth, I was so numb with cold. I could not find anything in that small place and hunted for my comb like a Japanese juggler, barely able to get under the bed, and wondering if I would ever come out alive. It was a miracle that I got down to breakfast in time.

That afternoon, accompanied by my two jailers—the nuns who had met me at the station—we set out for the Conservatoire. This was the day of days. We walked endlessly, and I suggested taking a bus. The nuns said the Reverend Mother had told them not to, and I felt that by the time I got there

I should be exhausted. Strange to say, dancing has never tired me but walking always did. Later, when I met the famous Argentina, she told me that it was the same with her. I was delighted and felt that on another planet I had been a great dancer. I have always believed that life is a repetition of experiences we have already lived; why then was I so afraid of death?

The Director of the Conservatoire was to receive us, and when we reached the great building, my tongue was so dry that I wondered how I would be able to answer any questions he asked. In any case, I really knew nothing, only had a natural voice and a daring instinct for beauty which was, I suppose, individual.

We were shown into a vast library by a little man with very short coat-tails, looking like a French sparrow, dusty and intelligent. I presented the nuns to the Director, and they sat down with their umbrellas straight in front of them, looking at the carpet. I was embarrassed to have them with me. The Director gave me an understanding smile. He had a twinkle in his eye and the telepathy between us was immediate. I was very relieved that he did not ask me to sing, but began to speak about a career and I noticed the danger-signal of Sister Gertrude's rising lip. The heartache of the day before came back to me, and suddenly I wanted to weep. But I controlled myself and said: "Monsieur, I will go through anything and serve as your most humble pupil. I have fought a great battle to win permission to come here, and I feel it is my duty and it will be my happiness to prove that I was right." He seemed delighted at my frankness, and took my hand in a warm clasp—perhaps a little too warm, I thought; it gave me an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach.

After about an hour's conversation, he invited us to see over the Conservatoire. It was a very beautiful building with a large staircase made of pure white marble, which I greatly

admired, little knowing that one day I would be thrown down its steps by a jealous student. The walls were of solid mahogany, and busts of the great musicians were placed all round.

We entered a bare, uninteresting room, where a policeman-like woman with a florid face, flourishing a long ruler, was teaching about a hundred girls to read music at sight. A terror overcame me that I have never forgotten. The sea of faces looked up at the Director and me standing in the doorway, guarded by the two nuns, and there was a suppressed titter. It took me months, when I was accepted, to convince those students that I was neither mad nor a convict—merely a well-bred girl who was not allowed her liberty until she had proved worthy of it. I made up my mind there and then that to remain in the convent would be impossible. Adaptable as I was, I could not combine those two contrasting atmospheres. I would have to think it all out in my narrow little bed that night.

I did not sleep a wink and in the end decided to write to my parents and ask if they knew, or could find out from my travelling companion of the mouse-purse, any family sufficiently dull not to be dangerous, where I could go and live. I could return to the convent for my classes, much as I would like to forget about them.

I wrote the letter next day, but I waited for the answer for more than a fortnight. During that time everybody became charming to me. Like a decorative weed I took root and almost became part of the institution. In the recreation hour I used to have circles of the nuns and girls round me, popping different questions like a contest—about things I had never even done. I gave them glowing answers and found their admiration and curiosity exhilarating. I told them legends about Peru that were true, but of places I had only visited in my imagination. They were enraptured. I told them about large birds of paradise flying from the tree-tops, and I had

seen only humming-birds, but, having had an interest in fashion all my life, I realised that to make a design stand out one has to exaggerate to a point of disproportion.

At last, one morning when we were sitting at breakfast, a nun came and handed us our letters as though they were pieces of cheese and she was going to set a trap and cut off our tails. I could hardly contain my joy on receiving three letters—one from each of my sisters and the other from Mamma. I put hers in my bosom to keep until I could be alone under a tree to read it. The girls watched me closely and asked me with impish expressions who the letter was from. I answered: "Who else but from my mother?" and they seemed disappointed. It was evidently not colourful enough and I should have said "my fiancé." Francisco had completely passed out of the picture. I loved him, but his insensitivity frightened me and I already had a sure conviction that I would never marry, and that my pity and protection of unhappy people was the only form of maternity I should be allowed to know.

Mamma wrote first that her health was good and my absence was not causing her too much of a heartache, and then, as I read palpitatingly, that she and Papa had decided to allow me to live in a *pension de famille* as I had proposed. They had been recommended a family, about whom they were making enquiries. Madame Aubert was the widow of a government employé. She had three sons and a daughter, the latter living at home; the sons were brilliant professors of the arts, and the daughter was studying singing at the Conservatoire. Madame Aubert herself gave piano lessons. Towards the end of her tender letter, Mamma said that if I ever felt I wanted to return home, I must do so, as one must never be too proud to admit one has been wrong. "Bend like a bamboo in a storm, darling," she ended. "Never be rigid and you will never break."

I sat in a daze. I could really leave the convent. What

fun it would be to live in a family without rigid discipline and the need to make conversation to please the nuns and the inhibited girls. I could not let myself be completely natural before them. I had the presumption to think that my vitality and zest for life might make the nuns regret their vows, and I did not want to be responsible for the smallest stain on their chaste minds, which had the innocence of snowdrops and just as little perfume. Would they be offended at my leaving, or perhaps think I wanted to lead an immoral life? I loved them and could not bear the thought of hurting them, but I knew I must get away to learn and grow and become myself.

A week later, there arrived another mauve letter smelling of Parma violets, that faint and persistent perfume that I always associated with my mother and the large satin sachets she kept among her lingerie. Every detail of my home came before me, and it seemed as if my heart were being squeezed between strong hands. The letter was all affection and told me that everything had been satisfactorily arranged with Madame Aubert, and that Mamma would soon be writing to the Reverend Mother to make my leaving seem as plausible as possible. I lived a week of complete deceit waiting for the bombshell to fall, but my secret was not so unguessed as I imagined.

One day we were walking in the grounds at evening. The world was at rest and there was holiness in the air. I always waited for this hour and the sunset that was like a child's prayer before going to sleep. I felt a sadness at the thought of leaving, for I loved these gardens; there was peace in them and excitement, when the swallows came sweeping to the ground without touching it, like large black satin ribbons driven by strange winds not to be felt by humans. One of the girls, who was beautiful and gentle, sang with a choirboy's voice devoid of any passion but with a lovely lilt, which rose to her upper tones like an English skylark. There was a

certain understanding between us, though on my part there was also a minute jealousy of her facility to reach those top notes of alabaster white.

This girl now approached me and we walked together. Suddenly she asked if I were going to leave the convent; she said that she had felt it for many days and was sad. I tried to look composed but was made breathless by her psychic vision. She told me that everyone loved me without understanding me, and the walls of the convent were lighter for my laughter and even the lessons more exciting. I felt flattered and guilty. She asked me again if it were true, and I said yes. The sorrow that swept over her face was like a beautiful storm at sea. I told her I would come back and see her. She looked incredulous and remarked that I had made them all dance like puppets on golden strings, and when I went away it would be just the end of an experience for me. She took my hand and kissed it, which made me feel as though I had committed a sin, and I turned to see if anyone was near, but only the swallows were making trellises of black against the already darkening skies. Still holding hands, without uttering a word, we walked back to the refectory.

After many prayers, which I repeated mechanically in a different rhythm, emphasising the dramatic parts, to the consternation of the nuns, who turned to look at me from the screen of their starched hoods, we said goodnight and walked to the dormitory, one behind the other like prisoners, a nun at the end of this long chain of human emotions dressed in uniform. What strangers we all were, and probably all with the one thought of freedom and the time when we would be able to be our real selves.

I had sewn in my pillow amidst all the feathers—which were not swan's but fowl's, with sharpened points that made me dream of the most horrible tortures—a photograph of the young Greek I had loved so hopelessly as a child. I kissed

it through the thick linen cover every morning and night, and, as I made my bed myself, it had never been discovered.

That night, I felt suddenly I must see it and hold it closer. I had to unpick the pillow to extricate it, and sew it up again in the middle of the night by the light of the moon. There was always a nun sitting up praying at the end of the dormitory, and for some perverse reason my scissors squeaked like a dying mouse. I sweated madly, feeling as guilty as if I were stealing; and when I had retrieved the picture, I thrust it in my bosom and could not sleep for hours.

I woke to hear a bird singing a song of his own, and thought that I too would soon be leaving this sombre cage to stretch my wings and sing as loudly as I wanted without a mute on my emotions.

When I came to the refectory for our meagre breakfast, the little postman-nun beamed at me with another letter from Mamma. I grasped it hungrily and asked for permission to leave the room, then sat down on a bench outside and suddenly she seemed mystically near; I could almost hear her walking towards me with her witty little feet. This time she wrote that Madame Aubert would be coming to the convent in a few days to take me away. The words swam before my eyes. I felt an enormous pang of fear and almost voluptuous delight and was in a state of exaltation for the rest of the week. Then, one morning as we were sitting at our studies, a novice entered and told me that the Reverend Mother wanted to see me, and I knew that the moment had come.

I flew to my cubicle and tidied my hair, looking at myself in the glass and changing my expression to one of misery and abject humility. I quite enjoyed the drama of the situation, though with an unpleasant feeling of guilt.

As I raced down the corridor, I noticed all sorts of things I had not seen before, for now I was impersonating someone else. I knocked timidly at the door, but instead of walking in

with the dignity I intended, the floor having been polished that morning, I slid towards the Reverend Mother on a fur mat made of a combination of two peculiar animals—hedgehog and lamb, I think, and known as “Mongolian goat.” How they ever met and loved to create so hybrid a fur, I do not know.

The Reverend Mother stood, as I entered, with such severity in every line of her habit, I could hardly distinguish her face. Little Madame Aubert was there, and I have never seen anyone sit so near the edge of a chair without falling off. After curtsying to both of them and kicking the rug back nonchalantly towards the door, I smiled innocently to relieve the tension. The Reverend Mother told me that she was sorry to hear that I had not been happy in their midst, and that Madame Aubert had come to fetch me to live with her. I said I had been happy but not at ease, which is almost more important, and I felt I must be able to fly with freedom and follow my star. Raising her eyebrows, she said she realised that a convent and a career were horses of a different step, but she hoped that I would look on the convent as my spiritual home and come to see her whenever I felt the urge. I said that I would return as soon as possible; then I turned to Madame Aubert. By this time she had sunk into and become part of her chair, looking anxiously from one to the other of us. I was sorry for her, but did not like her. My first impression is always right.

The Reverend Mother asked if I was ready to leave, and I replied that my packing would take me a short time. I thanked her for all that she had done for me and hoped that in my modest way I had conformed with the rules. She said they would all miss me, and I felt complimented.

I ran upstairs with several students following me, and packed feverishly. My clothes seemed to have swollen with joy and rebelled against getting back into my modest trunk. I pushed them and squeezed them and ended by sitting on

the trunk and breaking the lid. It looked like an Irish tripper's and I felt embarrassed to descend the stairs with it, but held it tightly against my body, praying that my underclothes would not fall out as I went down.

All the girls were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, some of them reproaching me for not having told them I was leaving, but I said it was all very sudden and much too complicated to explain. The nuns were reserved but sweet and, followed by Madame Aubert, I was ushered through the hall by all of them. Kisses—goodbyes—and I got into an enormous four-wheeler in which I found a relation of the fur mat I had slipped on. There must have been a lot of Mongolian goats in Brussels at that time.

The cabman whipped up his horse. It came unwillingly to life and moved slowly off. The convent gates closed behind us, and I nearly burst into tears. How I had longed for that moment. Now it had come, and, if I could, I would have pushed it away.

After a few moments' silence, Madame Aubert became quite talkative and told me with many superlatives how beautiful were her house, her daughter, and her pictures, how her husband was dead and she had had no idea of taking a stranger in her home but had heard such wonderful things about me, she was sure that her daughter and I would be great friends. I said that I was honoured that she had found me fit to become one of the family, and would be delighted to have the friendship of her daughter.

We arrived at a typically clean and unimaginative Belgian house at the other side of a beautiful park with many statues—not conventional outdoor sculpture but statues one would like to live with. I was lost in admiration at the taste with which they had been placed with a green carpet of grass beneath their feet, and the trees waving their branches over them as if to fan them to life. I told Madame Aubert this,

and she looked at me as though I were speaking a foreign language.

The house door was opened by an ugly, clean little maid with reptilian eyes, who carried my trunk upstairs with a trot and a smile. We entered the living-room with its high and spacious walls and fine pictures—the work of Madame Aubert's son. She asked me if I would like some refreshment which I gladly accepted, and was brought some steaming hot coffee with delicious, fattening cakes. The coffee left much to be desired, as the Belgian people boil it from morning to night. Madame Aubert asked if I did not like it, and I said yes, but that the aroma was more important. I heard a rippling laugh and turned round. A beautiful girl was standing in the doorway. She said: "You have expressed what I feel, but I didn't explain it that way," and, stretching out both her hands, she drew me to her with an enveloping smile, showing perfect little square teeth and a generous, lovely mouth. She had quantities of gold hair piled on the top of her head, eyes of periwinkle blue, and her beautiful hands were like some strange flowers I had seen in a book—helpless but decorative. She walked with the statuesque posture of a Tanagra, and one felt she had never worn a corset. The maid waited on her as if she were the mistress of the house, and she accepted everything with condescension but without warmth. She sat down and took me in from head to foot with kindly curiosity; I was drawn to her but was amazed at her patronising attitude towards her mother, who idolised her. It shocked me, remembering my reverence for my own mother.

When I had eaten too many of the heavenly cakes, she said she would show me to my room and hoped I would like it. I said I hoped so too, as my room was my world, and imagination was the architect with which I built my castles in the air. She laughed wholeheartedly, and, taking my hand, said she loved originality and asked where mine came from.

I told her it was hard to say; perhaps it was from my ancestors.

We climbed up three flights of stairs, talking all the way. There was a white wooden staircase to the top floor that enchanted me, and I was glad I should be under the roof so that no one would trespass on my dreams. A little breathlessly, we entered a large room which I thought was going to be mine, but my companion led me up three more steps to a dressing-room, which she said her mother had reserved for me. My heart sank, as space means so much to me, but then I saw that the window opened on to a stairway leading directly to the garden, and a garden is for me just another room, where nature and thoughts are free. Saying that she hoped I would be happy in my little room, Mademoiselle Aubert closed the door and left me.

I looked round my domain. The furniture was of imitation bamboo of a lovely amber colour. The bed was large and had a great welcome in it; there were two straight-backed needle-point chairs, embroidered by Madame Aubert in bright colours, the gayest carpet with flowers playing ring-o'-roses and a dear little chandelier with brass cupids. And in a triangular corner was a small fireplace. Outside in the garden the birds were singing their loudest. It was one of the most beautiful and confused gardens I had ever seen and I was delighted that only I had this access to it.

After unpacking my clothes and trying to find room for everything, I wondered with a little anxiety if there were a bathroom near, and, trying every door discreetly, I entered a dreary room with a bath made of lead on what I thought were stilts: I wondered how one ever got in or out without breaking one's neck.

Returning to my room, I slipped on my dressing-gown of gay striped yellow silk, and lay on my bed, soft and sweet-smelling. The odour of the sheets fresh from laundering, and

the eiderdown of faded green silk, so light and yet so warm, made me feel at home, and I began to purr within.

The shadows were falling and the scents from the garden rose through the open window like a newly opened bottle of perfume. I felt for the first time that I was free, and that it would be exciting to conquer something, whatever it might be. I would ask Madame Aubert's daughter questions about the Conservatoire and the girls, whom I already saw in imagination as future enemies.

After re-reading Mamma's last letter, I put on my most becoming dress and walked downstairs self-consciously, as if the walls were taking me in. Madame Aubert greeted me with a dubious smile. I did not quite trust her and felt she thought I might be a rival to her beautiful daughter, which to me was absurd. I asked her daughter's name and she said it was Marguerite. What a strange coincidence; it was the same as mine. She asked what they should call me, and I told her Margo or Bébé as I was called at home. She said Margo was more dignified for me.

She showed me the studio with a large grand piano in the corner and two huge bookcases filled with scores bound in vari-coloured leather, all signed by Marguerite. She wrote with a quill pen and her writing was just like young ferns intermingled. The pictures on the walls were entirely of musical subjects.

The door opened and Marguerite entered. I jumped, feeling indiscreet to be looking at her music. She embraced me and told me that it was "our" music room and she wanted me to share it and we could arrange about the hours. I said I would accept whatever time was given me. Madame Aubert sat in silence, and I felt the abnormal love she had for her daughter was going to make things difficult for me.

Marguerite told me I must be ready at eight-thirty the next morning to go with her to the Conservatoire. I asked

her how I should dress. She said, "As simply as possible," and, looking at her, I wondered why. She was heavily made up and I thought she would be more beautiful *au naturel*. There were discussions with her mother about this, but when my opinion was asked one day, I only said I never used make-up as I was a different type and did not need it.

We arrived at the Conservatoire punctually next morning, I too excited to be afraid. I was ushered at once into Madame Vancranden's singing class. She was a short, fat woman with a florid face, watery blue eyes, and pepper-and-salt hair piled on her head with beautiful tortoise-shell pins. She had an indifferent smile which she used sparingly.

We sat round a large barren room on benches. There was just one mirror in which the girls could see their facial expressions as they took their different notes. When Madame tried to show them how it should be done, she became a magenta red and I sensed disaster ahead. Some of the girls had sexless, celestial voices; others were full-bosomed contraltos with enormous low notes, large spaces in the middle, and steely top notes.

Nobody spoke to me and I sat silent, tremendously interested. When one of the girls did anything original, I had to hold my hands tightly together so as not to applaud. Most of these girls came from bourgeois families. A few of them were straight-laced daughters of doctors, dentists, and even "kept women." They looked on me suspiciously from the first; it is always fatal to be "different." I spoke to Marguerite about it, and she said they were under the impression that I was a Society girl trying to become an artist. I told her that was a biased idea and one could be both; and remembering my father saying that indifference is the greatest form of protection, I determined to use it. At lunch-time I took my sandwich and ate it alone under a tree, until, one day when for some unknown reason I had more courage to face life

and its difficulties, I asked the others' permission to join them. They agreed and I was at my wittiest, doing imitations of all the teachers, and in less than an hour I felt I had broken the ice of ignorance that goes hand in hand with suspicion.

Madame Vancranden too disliked anyone with personality, which I must have had, and during the first three months I was in her class she rarely addressed me. Then one day for the first time she asked me to get up and sing. I was breathless with fear, more frightened than I can describe, but, giving one long sigh, I braced myself and stood up near the piano. Madame told me abruptly not to lean on it and I retaliated by saying it gave me courage. She did not like this, but the girls did, and I felt they were more sympathetic towards me. She played a few chords, then looked up and said, "Begin." I opened my mouth but nothing came out, so, to hide my embarrassment, I said the invitation to sing was so unexpected that I was not yet in the mood. She stared at me as though I were insane, and the girls were convulsed with laughter.

Suddenly the door opened and the Musical Director entered—a sly little man with beady eyes and a cruel mouth. His appearance had evidently been arranged. He asked me what I was going to sing, and I said one of my father's compositions. He said he thought my father was an ambassador, and I told him he had also studied music and composition with Verdi. He looked amazed and whispered to Madame Vancranden, who turned a deeper red, and then he told me I could play for myself. Madame rose with such rage in her eyes, I felt she hoped I would fall over and not be able to prove I had any voice at all.

A hundred pair of eyes were on me, and I swam in a maze of fear but said to myself: "This is your chance, and you must take it." Then I opened my heart and mouth, and sang one of Papa's Spanish songs with such tone and feeling that

everyone in the room was surprised; even in Madame Vancranden's eyes there was amazement. The Director glanced at her, and I divined he was annoyed that she had not taken more notice of me. Turning to me he said: "You undoubtedly have a voice, but I cannot judge you in such romantic music. You will study two or three big classical arias and have a public audition at the end of the year." I was almost speechless and replied: "But, sir, my voice is not trained." He said: "I am not worried about that. You have a natural voice and the technique you can learn." I thanked him and sat down, weak from emotion, but feeling I had won a battle and the respect of the other students.

When the class was over, they crowded round and asked if they might walk home with me, but I felt it wiser to refuse. The expression on Marguerite's face was indefinable. I looked into my meagre little purse to see if I had enough money to invite her to a café; the new turn of events called for a celebration. Finding a few francs, I invited her, thinking that if there were not enough for us both to have chocolate and a cake, she could have one and I the other. She was a trifle condescending but accepted, and we went and sat outside a famous café with doors hung with curtains of real lace and handles in the shape of dolphins. I was happy and excited, but Marguerite was aloof. I felt she was upset, and I tried to excuse myself in her eyes by saying the Director had been kind only to encourage me, but she ate in silence. I longed for her to taste my chocolate, so that I could taste a piece of her cake, but did not dare suggest it. Drinking out of the same cup is really for lovers; other people think only of germs.

When we reached home Madame Aubert opened the door, and something in my expression made her ask what had happened. I told her I had sung before the Director and she turned towards her daughter with fear in her eyes. I

understood it in a flash and said hurriedly I was still a beginner and so different from Marguerite we could never clash, but I knew from that moment she took a morbid dislike to me. A little success had disrupted the charming atmosphere that had been created.

Dinner that night was eaten almost in silence and, though I was happy that I had made an impression, I knew it was going to be a fight. Every little success I had I would have to hide. And I thought, too, of the girls who had not come forward to congratulate me but had looked at me with furtive glances as I left the class-room.

Next day, at Madame Vancranden's request, I was taken up by one of the senior pupils to the sight-reading class. I trembled, never having studied this subject and knowing its importance.

The girl who took me told me Madame Keupells was the teacher and the most demanding in the Academy. She opened the class-room door with a flourish and presented me with mock reverence. Madame Keupells looked at me over her glasses. She was a tall woman with many contradictions in her face—kindness, severity, and even timidity, like a nice Victorian teapot, I thought, pompous, colourful, yet staid. I advanced towards her and bowed. I knew the pupils were making fun of me but pretended not to see. She put a piece of music on the music stand and asked me to sing the words with expression and punctuation. I felt something melt in my brain and the room went black; I stood swaying. She called to me in a sergeant-major's voice that revived me instantly as though she had put spirits of ammonia under my nose, and in a rather shaky but colourful voice I began to sing. Never having had good sight, it was a tremendous effort. I apologised and told her I would study hard; she said I would have to. She asked me what country I was from and I told her Peru. She had never heard of it but smiled

with kind ignorance. I felt somehow she liked me and was consoled.

On the way home, diving into my purse again, I decided to comfort myself once more with the forbidden fruit—hot chocolate. It would deprive me of my tram-fare, but I could not resist the thought of the lovely drink flavoured with vanilla, and the excitement of the gay crowd in the café. I knew I had promised at home that I would never go out alone, but I felt that the promise was given under different conditions and I could forget it.

I sat in the smart café completely at ease with my conscience and kept blowing on my chocolate to show the waiter, who was impatient to get my table for a more lucrative client, that it was a physical impossibility to drink it while it was so hot. He pretended to dust the table at least six times, and at last, in a rage, I said: "Waiter, please pass me the newspaper as I am waiting for someone, and don't dust this table again." He was impressed and went away to the other side of the room, still watching me, while I used the newspaper to screen me from his gaze.

Before long, one of the most attractive human beings I have ever met approached the table and asked if he might share it with me. I was too shy to answer but glanced round at the other tables, asking mutely: Why this one? as there were many empty. He said he wished to sit with me, as he had seen me in the streets with music under my arm, "looking like a bird of paradise that had flown from faraway lands to give colour to this grey climate." I was overcome by the poetry of this speech and asked him to sit down, but when he did I felt embarrassed and sat looking straight in front of me. Taking out a pencil, he began to sketch my profile and asked me not to lift my head so high, as he did not like that proud angle. I told him I had the blood of the Incas in my veins, and if he knew their history he would realise that the pride was due to atavism. Also, I said, I was not supposed

to be there alone and must leave. He seemed amused and said we would meet again, and I replied that I hoped so—under different conditions. I began to be nervous that he would offer to pay for my drink, and was even more worried that I lacked the money for a tip, so, putting down the exact price of the chocolate, I said the waiter had made me feel I had occupied the table too long and so must be punished. My companion laughed heartily, closing his eyes and throwing back his head, and this gave me the opportunity to escape.

I rushed into the street, thinking that he would follow me to know where I lived, and though I longed for this, my conscience spurred me on and I ran in the opposite direction, my heart thumping with a delightful sense of adventure. He was the first interesting man I had spoken to since I left home, warm and intelligent, and I felt he must be an artist.

Little stars were appearing in the sky like sequins from an angel's wand. It was a cold evening; my fur coat was short and the wind blowing against me whipped the blood in my thighs and made me walk quickly. I wondered why people looked at me and knew that something new had entered my life. I longed for another to-morrow and what it might bring. The shops were still lit up, and I saw lovers holding hands. I did not want to go home. Why had I run away? Would I always have to walk through the streets and lanes wearing blinkers? "No," I thought, "when I have made a name and money, I shall be independent and then whatever happens I will foot the bill and explain to no one."

I was late home and a strange atmosphere greeted me. Madame Aubert said acidly that dinner was cold, and Marguerite looked up with curiosity, trying to feign indifference as to where I had been. I told them I had walked home because the evening was so beautiful, and they smiled incredulously. After I had eaten, I gathered my books together and with a theatrical curtsy left the room.

Everything in my funny little sanctum looked different. I felt happy, if guilty, and as I fell asleep the wallpaper seemed covered with the eyes of my unknown Lothario, and the perfumed speech of the flowers in the garden accompanied me into that dream world, where strange people put on different costumes to fool us but are invariably one and the same.

The courage of the evening was with me next morning. The atmosphere at breakfast was chilly. Marguerite hardly spoke to me and I left the table singing an impressive tune from an imaginary opera, feeling that something was going to be thrown at my back. Nothing could damp my mood.

Instead of practising ten-minute scales to warm up my voice, I ran through the park, singing at the top of my lungs to greet my beloved statues. The love of sculpture has helped me greatly in my art, for the understanding of the formation and colour of words can give them new life. It has always been a source of great satisfaction to me when any of my audience have looked up with added interest at a particular, specially coloured phrase. But only a minority really appreciates the singer who at times sacrifices the voice to bring home the message of the word.

In the class that morning I asked the students to tell me more about the end-of-the-year audition, of which the Director had spoken. What did one sing? And what did one wear? They said that they, the seniors, would compete for the Gold Medal of the Arts, but I, the beginner, would only have to prove that I was worthy to remain in the Conservatoire to study and qualify to compete for the medal after many more terms. One chose for oneself the arias one would sing and dressed as attractively as one could, to try to influence the jury in case one failed with one's art. I thought this was prostitution and said I could only do my best and did not

want to influence anyone. They laughed sarcastically and moved away.

A terror seized me. Examinations are for calm, uncreative people. One cannot do one's best when one knows one is being judged not by one's qualities but by one's faults.

I decided to talk to the dear old theory-teacher, Monsieur Manoury, about my choice of songs. He must have been eighty, with a mane of thick white hair, very yellow strong teeth, and a lisp which somehow contradicted his great intelligence. His wonderful elephant ears, quite the biggest I had ever seen, had a way of twitching when something amused him. He wore a black woollen jacket, which had so many pleats that it looked like two accordions joined together, and in his tie a large cameo of such beauty that his shy personality seemed to be hiding behind it. Though at first I was extremely dull in his class, even stupid, he had a quiet patience, and I put on a face of such pain when I made a mistake that he never dared scold me as much as I deserved.

After the class I waited for him and asked him what he thought I should prepare for the great day. He said: "Choose something that you enjoy singing and lose yourself in it—and don't worry." "But the other girls are not kind and will be delighted if I cannot stay here," I cried. He raised his ears and brow simultaneously and said that if I failed it would prove that the jury had very bad judgment. He gave me confidence in quite an impersonal way and walked off, scratching his curly white hair, his coat with its wide sleeves floating in the breeze.

I walked home slowly, my heart thumping. I was frightened and irritable. It was all of such importance to me and my future, and nobody really cared. Madame Vancranden showed plainly that she disliked me; Marguerite, I felt, was no longer a friend but had become a rival. I was prepared to

love her but those mysterious walls, that are built of thought, are stronger than concrete, and one cannot destroy or look through them.

I went straight up to my room and found a strange, black cat lying on the bed, purring like amorous thunder. It gave me a wonderful welcome and the old superstition of a black cat bringing luck changed my mood. We had a lovely game with a silk tassel I pulled off my sleeping-jacket, then I put on my nicest dress for no particular reason, and went downstairs.

From the sitting-room came a faint odour of some unknown cigarette and I could hear a man's voice in discussion with Marguerite. A certain something in her tone as she answered him made me fancy that he was someone special in her life, and I was not wrong, for she later married him. He was a great lawyer and a charming personality.

As I entered, he rose and looked at me curiously. Marguerite hesitated, then introduced me. She was jealous, I knew, of what she called my "exotic nature" and would have preferred, I felt, that I had not come in. After making one or two banal remarks, I took a book of poems and began to read and she made no attempt to draw me back into the conversation. I was so annoyed at her treating me like a stranger in front of the visitor that at table I took my courage in both hands and carried on the most wonderful mental fencing with him and gave her no chance to say a word.

After dinner I went to my room to see if my cat-friend would like a drink. He had disappeared; only the tassel remained on the bed like a silent tear. I was desolate and sat down and wrote Mamma a letter I never sent, it was so full of drama and sadness. I told her I longed to fly home, I was utterly terrified of facing an audience, and what would I wear? The other girls were going to spend fortunes on gorgeous dresses to influence the judges; I had nothing but my First Communion dress in white organdie, hand-embroi-

dered by the nuns in Peru, and I would look absurd in it, as if I wanted to appear virginal and pure. Then suddenly I had a brilliant idea. I would buy some artificial lilies-of-the-valley and make a diadem for my hair, and I would dye my white moiré ribbon sash and my white satin shoes the green of the leaves with spinach-water, which I had heard was a splendid dye, and I would wear my pearl necklace. The pearls were very small, it was true, but they had been given me for my First Communion and I felt would bring me luck. I jumped up, dived frantically into my trunk and pulled out the really lovely dress. I tried it on and paraded in front of the glass, singing and making the most dramatic gestures, which clashed a little, I felt, with the purity of the gown, then experimented with some hair styles and was not displeased with the whole result. I went to bed in the small hours, utterly exhausted but with a settled plan of what I was going to wear and sing. I would choose for my dramatic aria "The Mother" from Meyerbeer's *The Prophet*, and for my second number "My Heart opens at thy sweet Voice" from *Samson and Delilah*.

I rose very late the next morning, and had no time to think of my worries, only to swallow the hot, insipid coffee which tasted as though it had been boiled all night, as I was sure it had. Marguerite was in a bad mood as we walked to the bus and said: "I saw the light on in your room. Why were you not asleep? Were you reading?" I said: "No, I have too much imagination to read at night. It is the only time I can think and live in my own world." I did not say anything about my dress rehearsal. She asked me if I had chosen my songs, and when I told her what I would be singing, she seemed utterly amazed at my daring. I said: "Knowing as little as I do, I shall have to use my instinct. If I knew the difficulties, I probably shouldn't dare, so please don't destroy my courage." She was silent, then asked with a strange expression: "What did you think of my friend last night?"

"I think he is extremely intelligent and civilised. Is he a Belgian?"

She appeared annoyed at my admiration and asked if he were my type.

"I have no physical type; it's the mind that interests me," I countered. Then, looking at her mischievously, I asked: "What did he think of me?"

"He didn't mention you."

"That's interesting. Now he really intrigues me." Then I appealed to her: "Marguerite, why are you so different with me? Please be as you were. Have I done anything wrong?"

"Why do you try to be friendly with the girls at the Conservatoire?" she answered, but I knew it was to conceal her real thoughts. "They're so ordinary. I can't imagine anyone like you being interested in them."

"I have to be amiable to people. And, besides, there may be something in me that can help them."

"Why don't you give up singing and become a doctor?" she asked sarcastically.

"Can't one put healing into one's singing?" I cried. "Can't one feed one's audience with one's art? I shall feel I have a great responsibility if I succeed and realise my dream to be an artist, as I pray God I may."

She looked at me in astonishment. "You are quite the most complex person I have ever met," she exclaimed. "Is it your Peruvian blood?" I was abashed and did not know what to answer.

That day, Madame Vancranden asked me what arias I had chosen for the examination and I tactfully answered I would like her to tell me what she thought I should sing. She hesitated, then said: "One thing is as good as another, since you are only going to show what you can do." I felt she wanted to snub me, and said: "Thank you, Madame, then I will tell you what I have chosen." When I told her, she raised her

eyebrows and said I was not modest in my choice. She made me sing a few scales and told me to bring back the two arias the next day and to know them musically, as I would have to sing from memory. I was petrified, but said: "Certainly, Madame," and told myself that with God's help I would pull through.

I walked home alone. Marguerite avoided me. I felt both she and Madame Vancranden longed for me to fail, and tears, which I would not allow to spill, were in my heart and throat.

Turning a corner, I nearly banged into someone, who gave a joyful exclamation. I looked up. It was my friend of the restaurant. He was enchanted to see me, and I was so depressed that when he invited me to have coffee with him I said: "Please, I need your advice." So we went into the dearest little restaurant, where he asked that they should put us in a room where we could talk. This they promptly did with glistening eyes and ingratiating smiles. However, they were disappointed when my companion did not order dinner but only lovely fresh coffee and wonderful cakes and fruit.

He did not question me or say a word until we had finished our first cup of coffee and I had had an enormous piece of a delicious cake covered with sugar icing, that looked like a frosty morning in Paris.

Then he said: "This meeting is a wish come true. I have so longed to see you again, but was too discreet to follow you home. Now only tell me what you want me to know, and please believe that my one desire is to serve you. I promise I will never commit an indiscretion."

My instinct was to throw my arms round his neck, but instead I sat without a word, with a lump in my throat and two large tears running down my cheeks. Then, after what seemed an hour, I put my hand on his and thanked him and

said I would feel rich to have him as a friend. He told me he was a sculptor, and his name was horrible, but he made even that sound beautiful.

Then he said: "May I ask who you are?" and I answered: "I am here to study singing and to try and become an artist."

"You are one already."

"How do you know?"

"By the way you move and the way you use your hands as you speak—they are indications. And your speaking voice is so melodious that I long to hear you sing."

I told him I was going to compete for the right to stay at the Conservatoire for five years and study not only singing but recitation, drama, and the dreaded technique.

My imagination and emotions always ran hand in hand, but technique at first was almost a friendly enemy. In later years one comes to depend on it much more, like a companion whom one did not understand at school and only in middle life begins to lean on, appreciate and trust.

The hours seemed to pass like minutes and the shadows were falling when my new friend rose and said: "How I would love to take you into the country and enjoy a whole evening with you. But I don't want to make you do anything that your parents would resent, so I will take you almost to your door, hide behind a tree to see you enter safely, and won't even look at the number unless you tell me to."

When we said goodnight, he held my hand a moment and looked into my eyes, and I wondered if he could see the gratitude in them. I knew I could trust him, and that awful feeling of loneliness had left me. Here at last was someone I could turn to, and I almost prayed that he would not fall in love with me, for then the spell would be broken and I would lose him as a friend.

As the front door banged behind me, I heard Marguerite singing. It sounded lovely but unsponaneous. There was a

smell of incense and I knew that her lawyer friend was visiting her and felt instinctively that she would rather I did not meet him again. This was not conceit. She was much more beautiful than I, but I had sensed that he was interested in me and that it had annoyed her.

I wondered if Madame Aubert had left them willingly or whether she had hidden behind one of the various screens, to listen to their talk and feel by proxy the emotions that had slipped by her in life and which she was longing to recapture. (Once, when I was very quiet in my room, dreaming glorious trips into those lands that neither boats nor trains can reach, I was conscious of being watched, so for fun I took an ostrich feather and pushed it under the door. There was a scream, for my hostess was lying flat on the floor outside, trying to peep into the room. What she had hoped to see, I do not know.) When I went downstairs, the visitor had gone and after dinner Madame Aubert left us, and Marguerite asked me to dance for her. I had no costumes with me, so she brought down several beautiful scarves, some of gossamer that floated in the air, if you released them, like captured clouds. I took a long time to choose the one that most appealed to me, and Marguerite laughed and said: "If your art is as complicated as your taste, you will either be a great success or considered quite mad."

"Don't you think that madness and art go together?" I asked.

With a faraway look in her eyes, she answered: "Yes; I wish I were a little madder."

I said: "You are too ambitious, Marguerite. If I ever become anything, it will be in spite of myself. I am in love with beauty. I think that is what gave me the courage to leave my family, to prove to myself that beauty is even more important than love. You are too much in love ever to take your career seriously."

She blushed furiously. "Who told you that I am in love?"

"No one, but I felt it the other night. And that is what I want to put into my art, love such as you are giving that man." And, with that, I rushed out of the room and upstairs, holding the heavy fringed scarf of red and yellow that I had chosen for my dance.

I looked at myself in my glass, and pulling a red cotton rose out of a vase, with it rouged my cheeks and lips, as I had done at my godfather's that night which already seemed a lifetime away. Then I piled my hair high on my head, draped the scarf tightly around me, looked for my castanets, which I could not find I was so excited, and descended the stairs with an air of such grandeur that when the maid passed me she stepped aside as though she had never known me.

Meanwhile Marguerite had been looking through the music for something suitable and had chosen the Pavane by Ravel—"The Death of the Infanta." After going through it once, we put out the light and lit candles and I went to the end of the room. I was barefoot, as I had no shoes to match the scarf. On the first chord, I struck an attitude and held it for a minute, then I began to dance. The ecstasy of rhythm and movement intoxicated me, and when I ended I saw on Marguerite's face a look of undisguised admiration. She asked if I had learned the dance. I said no, and told her that in my country all women from Negresses to Royalty have rhythm and grace born in them. And suddenly a depression seized me. Dancing was so much easier than singing. It did not need that inner control which keeps the voice completely even. Would I ever attain it and realise my hope and become a great singer?

That night I dreamt that Saint Peter refused me the entrance to Heaven, and I woke up weeping.

Next day I decided to look for a little shop where I had seen some lilies-of-the-valley that would make my diadem. The narrow streets were charming with a thousand and one things in the shop-windows, all crooked with age, and the

intelligence and thought that had been put into the ugliest gifts tickled my sense of humour. In "my" shop, when I found it, were a purse made of cloth with the most awful horse's head on it, and a pipe-case with "Joseph" embroidered in forget-me-nots. I asked the proprietor, why Joseph? Was it the horse, the pipe, or the man who would buy it? He said it had been ordered but never called for, and went into a long rigmarole about the dishonesty of people and how he would never take another order or give any more credit. I laughed and said, "What a pity! I was just going to ask if you would give me credit, but the bunch of lilies-of-the-valley that I came for seems to have gone." He said that two days before a nun had bought it, for the month of Our Lady, he thought; but he might have another. After searching in a multitude of boxes, to my delight he found one. He asked me what I intended to do with the flowers, if he might be so bold, and I told him.

Suddenly, a door opened timidly, and the strangest little old woman crept in with a Red Riding Hood cape to protect her from the draughts, her head encircled by plaits of ebony-black hair; she could not have been a day under eighty. The shopkeeper beckoned to her; she advanced cautiously and he presented her to me, saying: "This is my bride." I showed her my flowers and asked her if she thought her husband could perhaps make the diadem for me, and when he hesitated she said: "I promise that he shall; I will be responsible." Catching sight of the clock on the wall, I saw with horror that I was ten minutes late, and hurriedly thanked them and said I would call for the diadem. "It must look very virginal, please," I told him. "Perhaps," he answered, and she laughed toothlessly. I hated leaving them. There was such cosiness in their shop and themselves. They crept round in their little felt slippers like delicious mice with no cats or traps to harm them.

I sped along the street, my feet hardly touching the earth.

People were running to their offices. They had intent faces and busy, anxious eyes. The Belgians are not a beautiful race; I looked for one lovely face and saw only healthy ones and bodies strong but without grace.

I was twenty minutes late at the Conservatoire. I tore off my clothes and crept into the class-room and into my seat with a distressed and chastened air, as though I had gone through a great sorrow.

A dark girl, who looked like an under-housemaid in an English boarding-house, was singing with the voice of an angel. I thought how odd it was that an organ of such beauty should be put into so unattractive a body, and wondered could one do anything to make her at least passable-looking? I was so busy re-creating her that I did not hear Madame Vancranden call my name. She repeated it sharply, then told me she wished to hear my aria from *The Prophet*. I was taken by surprise and, trembling from head to foot, stumbled as I rose—to the great mirth of all the girls; but I made a violent effort, and the air with which I came to the piano stilled them. I walked as I intended to walk on to the stage on the day of the examination.

I stood with my hands clasped, praying to be given the strength I needed. I longed to burst into tears, but a vision of Miss Green with her round, steely eyes rose before me saying: "Marguerite, remember your ancestors!" (She had almost made me hate them, she had suppressed so much in my nature with those snobbish words.)

I uttered the first glorious phrase: "Ah, my Son, be thou blessed!" and felt a still, moonlight peace descend on the entire room. I knew no rules, but my instinct guided me miraculously through that most difficult of all arias; I lived it as much as I sang it; I made it mine. Madame Vancranden accompanied me beautifully and, as I finished, looked up from her music as if she were seeing a stranger for the first time. I was sweating so much that when I sat down, every-

body passed me their handkerchiefs. Every bone in my body ached, but delightfully, and I had a profound satisfaction in having given something, whatever the result might be. I have never longed to be rich, but feel poor when I can give nothing to others; that is poverty indeed.

At lunch in the basement, where the girls dipped their sandwiches into their coffee, speaking Flemish so that I would not understand, there seemed to be a party for and a party against me. I wondered why I had so much influence, when I hated to be different and only wanted to make friends.

To-day some of the girls came towards me. They gave me their opinion of the way I had sung, and said they felt sure that Madame Vancranden approved, by the expression on her face. They asked me what I was going to wear for the examination, and I said: "I have nothing but a very simple dress in which I made my First Communion." They seemed relieved and smiled to one another, and told me again of all the money they were spending to enhance what to-day would be described by that horrible expression their "sex appeal."

Marguerite did not come near me. She did not mix with the other students at lunch time but ate alone in some small restaurant. She had not been able to win them over, and the resentment was mutual; but I could never have felt comfortable if I had not made a move towards so-called friendship. I have always wondered why I am so conscious of everybody's moods—it has only been detrimental. Sensitivity is wonderful for other people, but those who have it are martyrs. I am very grateful to America for having rubbed a few of my hyper-sensitive corners into smooth indifference. It is agony to conquer hypochondriacs and all those strange people who cling to one, trying to melt their inhibitions at the glow of a more giving nature.

When I went home, I crept up the stairs. I opened my door and lo, there was my black cat returned. I fell on the bed

on top of my music with my shoes on and lay in a divine haze, the cat sitting on my chest, breathing my breath, which I had been told as a child was dangerous, but I did not care: it was alive, it was warm, and I could feel its little heart beating against mine. I wondered whether the impression I had made on the other girls would last. It grieved me that there was not one soul in that large institution who shared my ideas. Intimacy of mind—I love it so and search for it in people's eyes all over the world. Understanding of others belongs to no class; it is just that miraculous something that unites two human beings without explanation.

I decided I must see my sculptor again. But how could I find him? I would say a prayer that I might meet him but must not allow myself to think of him too often, as I knew if I let myself fall in love, even for a passing moment, it would be bad for my studies. Artists in embryo must have one-track minds.

A knock at the door roused me. Perhaps it was Marguerite. But it was only the weasel-maid. She asked if I were not coming down to dinner, and I asked if she could bring me something on her way to bed. She promised she would and had never been so human before; she probably felt that Madame Aubert wanted her to remain a slave to Marguerite, who had a queen-complex and would not do a single thing for herself. Maids love that, and people who ask too little they despise.

When I was alone again, I got up and began another hunt in my trunk, this time for the *moiré* sash and satin shoes that had to be dyed green, the green of the leaves of the lilies-of-the-valley. The sash was so beautiful that I dared not expose it to the risk of the spinach water—I should have to find a real dyer. I would just make a bow of it, I decided, and let the ends hang down and trail on the floor. Trains to me were the acme of femininity and I resolved that in the future, when I could buy wonderful dresses, they should all have

long ones. And I actually found in later years that I could never even rehearse in short dresses, any more than I could wear a new dress for a performance without having first rehearsed in it. It is infinitely important for an artist to feel at home in whatever she wears in front of an audience, both for their sakes and her own. If she is not at ease, they are made to feel uncomfortable too, and I have known women singers who, though plain, have been given such a sense of security by a lovely gown that they have become almost beautiful as they sang.

With some difficulty I found during the next few days a little dyer, who looked like a Father Christmas that had been put away for several years. I took him my sash and shoes, and asked him to "dye these the colour of lily-of-the-valley leaves," and his eyes lit up when I explained why.

"I felt you were a singer when you came into the shop," he said, "but as you had neither powder nor rouge, I thought I might be mistaken." I told him my name and he was enchanted and said: "It is like music. I wanted when I was young to play the trombone." I could see that tiny man sitting behind that enormous instrument; he had no more breath in him than the Father Christmas in the attic to whom I had compared him. I asked him the—to me—most important question, what would he charge to dye my things, and he replied: "If Mademoiselle will let me have two tickets to hear her sing, we will not talk of charges." I promised him the tickets, but said I must still pay something, but he seemed very hurt and said firmly: "No." So I thanked him gratefully and felt I had made another friend. He asked me many questions, just to keep me in the shop, and I suddenly realised an hour had flown and I would again be late for the class, so off I rushed, promising to come back soon for my things.

I started to run. It was a windy day and there was an en-

chantment in the air; I felt that any moment I might rise as in my dreams. Suddenly someone tapped me on the arm. I turned. It was He. "I knew I would meet you," he said, with a wonderful smile.

"But why when I am in such a hurry? I can't wait!" I cried.

"Meet me this evening at the little café!"

"God willing, yes."

"It will be our first rendezvous," he added, and the words sang in my heart.

I was so out of breath when I arrived at the Conservatoire that I wanted to lie down and sleep but had to rush to the theory room. I made my excuses to Madame Keupells, and explained that I had been to have my sash and shoes dyed for the examination day, as I could not afford to buy new ones. Something seemed to melt in her expression, and she looked at me with kindness and understanding.

I was given a most glorious Handel aria to read at sight, and its beauty and cathedral quality soon made me forget all other things: I felt I was in a church, just praying to music. Though the class seemed endless I would not have hurried it, but I was longing for six o'clock and the rendezvous. It would be my first adventure, and I had a feeling of great daring. I would have to lie to Madame Aubert, which upset me, but I quietened my conscience as I had felt instinctively from earliest youth that certain lies are like medicine—necessary evils.

When at last the hour struck, I raced down to the dressing-room. The girls tried to be friendly and one of them had even brought a piece of ornate embroidery from her examination dress to impress me, but when I said: "Don't you think something simpler would suit you better? You are so young," she looked at me with suspicion as much as to say: "So you don't want me to look smart and appeal to the jury!"

They were becoming a nightmare to me, this jury. I imagined they would be like the figures I had seen in Madame

Tussaud's Waxworks in London, white-faced, with distant expressions, terrifying and immovable.

I polished my shoes with my handkerchief, for however shabby one's clothes, if the shoes are clean they give an air of good grooming. When I first visited America, I was much impressed by the fact that even the down-and-outs had beautifully polished shoes. I combed my hair, washed my face and brushed my clothes, and as I walked down the stairs the girls turned to look at me as though they had never seen me before. I felt my efforts had not been in vain, but had I realised it, the joy in my eyes alone was enough to give new life to my rather shabby clothes. As I have often said, we can bring our own scenery on to a bare platform with our thoughts and facial expression. I have always had a poor opinion of the singer who must have the pomp of opera to make an effect. The creative artist can cause his audience to see everything through the power of imagination and the art of showmanship.

As I left the Conservatoire, I pretended that it was my private residence, and walked with such an air that the people in the street looked at me in amazement. I was a little afraid, but the feeling of danger and of doing something forbidden thrilled me. Suddenly, Louis Waldenschreck—that was his "horrible" name—appeared. It was so sudden that I lost my breath, but not my poise, and gave him my hand as I had seen Mamma do with such elegance. He kissed it tenderly and I was utterly transported.

"Statues must have walked like you," he said.

"I adore to walk," I answered, and in those days I did, feeling that I was rehearsing for a great pageant.

As we neared the corner of the street there was a taxi waiting. "Let us go and dine out in the country," said Louis—and how could I refuse? The chauffeur opened the door for us with a delightful smile.

"I wonder, does he know we are strangers?" I asked my

companion, and he turned to me with the most expressive look, saying: "But are we?"

"No, of course not, or I would never have accepted your invitation. I have great confidence in you and know you are my friend," I answered.

"I don't know if you should trust me as much as that. There must be a certain danger in all relationships, or they die a natural death."

We sped along the country road. The shadows were falling and the perfume of the wayside flowers invaded the car. Louis sat with his hands lying listlessly in front of him, and I was happy that he did not begin flirting or making love to me. I wanted things to stay as they were, and he seemed to divine my thoughts.

We arrived at a little inn covered with a mass of orange blossoms entwined with roses. Large butterflies were floating aimlessly in the air like scraps of coloured ribbons thrown from the workshop of some imaginative modiste. The old lady to whom the inn belonged came towards us with a warm welcome, and Louis turned to introduce her, but hesitated, not knowing my name. When I told him, he looked almost startled, and said later that the beauty of its vibrations had struck him like the note of a lone bird.

We walked through the inn garden in ecstasy, it was so lovely and unexpected; its little tables, made out of large solid tree-trunks with hospitable glasses and bottles of every sort of wine and beer placed on them, seemed like silent friends waiting to welcome us. We sat down and were brought a menu in the most amazing writing, characteristic of a little inn trying to imitate a smart restaurant. It was naïve and delicious. I remember my delight at seeing chicken *chasseur* which I had not tasted since I left home, and *vin rosé*, the colour of pounded rubies sparkling in the rays of the disappearing sun. I asked that, to get the full nectar of the wine, I might taste it before eating. Louis was de-

lighted and said that it showed an intellectual palate. I told him I had learned this from my father and godfather, to both of whom I owed my gastronomic tastes.

It was exciting to sit with someone one hardly knew and sip this delicious wine with a chorus of birds, who must have been the reincarnation of great singers—they were just as egotistical, singing at the top of their voices, as though they were trying to drown our conversation and blur our thoughts. I felt how delightful it would be to allow myself to fall in love with this attractive man. He had everything, it seemed—romance, integrity and an almost feminine quality in a very masculine personality, which is, to me, the only type that can appeal completely to imaginative women.

We spoke little and had almost finished the bottle of delectable wine, when a pungent aroma pierced the air, and a young boy appeared with the longest loaf of bread I had ever seen. He was dressed as a chef with a hat no bigger than a very pretentious mushroom. He seemed to hold it on with his eyebrows and it threatened to leave him at any moment. He bowed with great ceremony and put the bread on the table. Then he disappeared and returned again, the eyebrows in exactly the same position, with a delightful brown earthenware dish with shells made of the freshest butter. I was always intrigued as to how, in France and Belgium, they could keep their butter so fresh when, in those days, ice-boxes would have been thought immoral. I asked the little chef his name; he told me: "Joseph, at your orders." With a bow and a flourish he disappeared again, returning the next time accompanied by his father, with a steaming dish of the most delicious chicken, garnished with every vegetable that this generous earth can produce. Joseph kept watching his father's feet so as to walk in complete rhythm with him, with religious respect for the food he had prepared. The wonderful slippers that this great chef was wearing were something that I remembered years afterwards. They were made of red

carpet, beautifully cut, and looked so distinguished on this fat, beloved old man with his marriage of chins and stomachs. When, with the tenderness of a nursing mother, he put his dish on the table, I clapped my hands in sheer admiration. He was delighted and his smile made him almost beautiful, but I was sad to see that very few teeth were left in the front of his mouth, which gave him a desolate expression like an empty theatre.

He stood to serve us and chose every vegetable and every piece of chicken that was put on my plate. He told me not to burn my fingers as the plates were very hot, and with the mischievous smile of a performing seal, said: "That is the greatest compliment from the chef." Joseph stood at attention with a large white napkin to flick any flies from the table. I prayed that he might not stand there for the rest of the evening, and, with the tact of a wary maître d'hôtel, he left us.

Louis asked me if that was the piece of chicken I preferred, to which I replied: "Being the youngest of my family, I have always been given the drumstick, which I have learned to love, but to-night I am going to explore the wing." And I added that I hoped he would not be shocked, but I could not possibly talk while I was eating, as it would detract from my joy, and I could only do one thing at a time. Did he think I had a one-idea mind? He answered shyly that he knew nothing yet about my mind, but he hoped to learn.

I shall never forget the delight of that evening. The moon was high in the heavens and so yellow, I wondered was it perhaps the sun that, interested in us, had forgotten to disappear behind the clouds? The fireflies were flickering in agitation round the lamp on the table, and it seemed to me symbolic of how attractive is danger, even if one has to die for it. I felt like the white moth that ended by falling fluttering on the table-cloth, after having flown round the light for almost an hour, and I was relieved that she was dying from

fatigue and had not fallen into the flame. The wine was beginning to tell and I was getting that delicious, reckless feeling that comes with the force of those punished grapes. I thought that with very little persuasion I would never return to Madame Aubert's, but where else could I go? How could I disobey my parents? I must not dream of it. Suddenly Louis asked if I would tell him what I was thinking, and was he part of it?

"Please don't penetrate too deeply into my heart," I answered. "Everything is perfect as it is, but one hair's breadth beyond would make it too hard for me. I must continue what I have begun with such pain and sacrifice."

He asked would I not rather marry and have children? I told him another man had asked me that before him, and if I did change my mind I owed myself to that first promise. He said: "You are almost too strong for any man to influence, and I admire you for it."

Then he began to talk of his work and asked if I would pose for a bust before I left Brussels, as it might be the only thing he would be able to keep of me. I was enchanted, and promised I would, if I could find time between the classes. We discussed many other things in complete harmony and I wondered were our destinies related and what would come from this delightful friendship. I was so far away in my thoughts that I was startled when I felt his hand holding mine. Ecstasy, fear and excitement possessed me and I turned away so that he might not see my face, that has always been the lantern of my emotions. Then I jumped up, feeling I must run away.

He grasped my hand firmly and made me sit down again, saying: "Don't run from me. I have learnt to master my desires and have made you a promise I will always keep."

I pulled myself together and said as calmly as I could: "We must go back now. I want to be able to do this often without remorse."

After bidding the old lady and her husband *au revoir* and thanking them for the charm they had put into their welcome and our meal, and seeing again the little boy still playing the part of a chef as in a French farce, we left the enchanted garden and saw just outside a dear old coachman waiting for clients, his horse looking like a pair of gloves into which one had blown some air—not really alive, just an expressive hide filled with hay. The old man looked at me with an inviting smile and a gesture, showing me his wonderful steed, whom he flicked with his whip, a little deceitfully, to make him wake up.

I said: "Let us drive a few miles in this romantic old cab and then take a taxi. The horse will be better fed to-night if the old man makes some money."

Louis smiled with tenderness and said: "You are so maternal for someone so young."

"Has maternity any age?" I answered. "Isn't it partly pity? It's so sad for an old man still to have to work. And why does one call old age by such a cruel name? One should call it a time of rest."

The old coachman helped me elegantly into the *barouche*, which creaked a little tactlessly I thought. Was it with the added weight of my delicious dinner or the uncertainty of the springs which, I felt, had been abused by the hospitality they had given to many lovers? He then made the strangest sound in his throat, and off we started. It was cosy in the musty old carriage, but we did not make much headway. The old man, thinking that we wanted to loiter, fell asleep, and the horse took the entire responsibility. I felt we should never get home and said we must find a taxi. I hesitated to disturb our so-called driver's slumber, but at last in desperation touched him lightly on the shoulder. He awoke immediately and was desolate at our leaving his *barouche*, but Louis would not allow me any more pity and we jumped into a taxi—so

modern, so quick, and so impersonal. We stopped at the corner of my street and Louis accompanied me to the door. I felt a lump in my throat at the idea of leaving him, and regretted having been so silly over his gesture of affection, so, very shyly, I put my hand in his and said: "I want to see you often. I know you can help me. Please come to my audition and tell me what you really think of me."

Without a word, he kissed each of my finger-tips separately with so much meaning that I was breathless. I pulled myself away, opened the door and ran up the stairs, the whole three flights, with my shoes in my hand until I got to my little room. How I regretted it was at the back of the house and I could not watch him disappearing out of sight.

I washed my teeth and brushed my hair with a vivacity of which I was rarely capable and jumped into bed, that dear old bed, the recipient of tears, anxieties, and now the confidences of this wonderful evening. Something had been awakened within me. It was the most mystic, all-enveloping feeling, almost like someone in the room. I was not alone any more; I was speaking with my heart.

The delightful wine made me sleep so heavily that, when I woke next morning, the story I had thought of for Madame Aubert had quite left my mind. Should I say that I had met an old friend of my mother's? But who could it be? And where would she live? I bribed the maid to let me have my coffee before the others and walked through the park instead of taking the bus on which all the good-looking young officers crowded. They always stared at me, picked up everything I dropped, and tried to make conversation. Those on horseback in the park rode beautifully and, in their cerise trousers and green jackets with the gold braid matching their hair, reminded me of a Viennese operetta. But I admired them from a distance, as I did not know which I was more fright-

ened of—the men or their horses—for, unlike my mother, who had almost ridden me into life, I have always been scared beyond words by those lovely animals.

The park that morning had never looked more welcoming or the statues more alive. I ran part of the way, and was almost at the door of the Conservatoire, when I saw Marguerite Aubert advancing with her languid walk and her beautiful eyes that missed nothing. I took the bull by the horns and ran towards her, saying how happy I was to see her, even if she felt differently towards me. This took her so much by surprise that she forgot to ask me where I had dined the night before and, exclaiming “I am late”, off I flew.

In the class there was a buzz of excitement, that strange examination atmosphere which invades every corner of the room. We were given the most difficult things we had ever had to read at sight, and I was not feeling so studious as usual. My mind kept roving back to the night before, the enchantment of the yellow moon and my companion. It had been a magic world and the touch of his hand remained with me still. Did he love me? I wondered again and again. Between lovers uncertainty is a pain that nearly becomes a pleasure, and when the beloved tells of his love, something of the charm and mystery fades; as when one leaves a precious bottle uncorked the contents will surely evaporate.

I could not concentrate that morning and made so many mistakes that Madame Keupells took off her glasses and gave me a questioning look. I asked if I might leave the class for a minute, flew down to the basement, got myself a glass of ice-cold water and pressed my forehead against the marble walls—then took one peep between the bars of the window to see if by any chance I could have a glimpse of Louis walking down the street. I could not, but returned to the class much calmer, did a brilliant reading, and was recompensed by an approving smile from Madame Keupells.

At lunch I could hardly eat, thinking of the story I had to invent for Madame Aubert. The girls were chattering like magpies, as afterwards we were having the drama class and all those over-sexed females were in love with the teacher, a middle-aged ex-actor, who thrived on teaching the ignorant and resented any sort of originality. He detested me, to the delight of the others, and always snubbed me. For his classes I took with me a long red chiffon scarf which I pinned on to my left shoulder, and I wore flat-heeled shoes. I had seen pictures of the Greek tragedians dressed like that, and the scarf helped me with my gestures. He had demanded that I should take it off, but I had refused, saying it gave me inspiration. This particular day he told me to sit at the very end of the bench and ignored me for the whole of the class. I was hurt but pretended to be exaggeratedly interested in every word he said, and smiled at him with sarcastic benevolence, which enraged him. He became the colour of a dark red peony and I feared would have an attack of apoplexy at any moment.

At the end of the lesson, he went and complained about me to the Director, and I was told to go to his office before leaving. My heart thumped with fear, mixed with a certain delight. I thought perhaps they would expel me before the examination, and I was dreading that day so much that any way of escape would have been a relief.

The Director at first was very severe and asked me pompously what had happened in the drama class. I said I was not aware that I had done anything wrong, but Monsieur Welder resented everything I did and had disliked me from the first. The Director asked if I would apologise, and I said: "How can I, when I have done nothing? But if you wish, Monsieur, I will not take my scarf to the class, as Monsieur Welder detests it. It will be a great sacrifice and I will have to choose different parts, as I cannot give of myself when I do not feel dressed in the right way."

He looked suddenly sympathetic and said: "I see. In fact, I understand."

I was elated, and, wreathed in smiles, was leaving the room when he called me back and asked a little hesitatingly if I would recite to him—with my scarf. I said that I would love to, but would rather wait, as I was so overcome with the idea of the examination and the fear of not passing that I was not quite myself. He answered: "Feel peaceful; I am not afraid for you," and if I had already passed I could not have felt happier.

I walked down the dark corridor, replacing my scarf on my shoulder, glowing with joy. I felt beautiful and radiant and important, so different from half an hour ago. One need never lose hope in life, for worlds can change in a second; the mind, after all, is the only master of ceremonies.

I loitered through the park on my way home, sat on my favourite bench, and watched the sun setting behind the trees. A sudden loneliness descended on the world when it disappeared, and even the statues seemed forlorn.

I dreaded meeting Madame Aubert, but consoled myself for the lie I was going to tell her by the thought of the indiscretion she was going to commit. If a friend has betrayed a confidence, I have always felt the right to deny whatever has been said. That is my own particular code of justice.

I went down to the dining-room at the very last moment, and knew I had been discussed before I appeared. I bowed solemnly to Madame Aubert and stooped down and kissed Marguerite on the forehead. Madame Aubert looked at me scrutinisingly and said suddenly in a high-pitched voice: "We were not privileged to see you at dinner last night."

I answered quite calmly: "No. I met a friend of my brother's unexpectedly."

"Indeed. What is his name?"

"As he is here on a diplomatic mission, I am not allowed

to tell, but when he returns, Madame, I will bring him to make your acquaintance, if I may."

"I shall be delighted."

"He is a charming person and I am sure you will all enjoy meeting him, especially you," I added, turning to Marguerite though she was the last person to whom I would introduce Louis. She smiled enigmatically, and I felt she knew I was not telling the truth.

After dinner I ran upstairs, very proud of my subterfuge and wrote another long, sad letter to Mamma, that ended: "They find me so different in everything. Am I always going through life, darling, a stranger? My sisters made me feel I was one in our home; it is a lonely feeling."

My dreams that night were anything but peaceful. I dreamt of cats, and all of them had Madame Aubert's face—and it was windy, and they all flew on broomsticks.

Next day, I had again to sing my big aria, so, with my breakfast, I ate a large piece of black bread to give me strength. Usually I tried hard to diet, looking much older than my years on account of my Spanish hips.

I was late, so took the bus instead of walking. To walk in a hurry is agony; one feels one's feet are always in the same place and that the buildings are moving away from one. A charming young officer looked at me with great interest. I thought how stupid it is not to be able to talk to people who seem anxious to know one, and appear much more attractive than those one meets in drawing-rooms. He helped me off the bus most gallantly, if a little theatrically. I said: "Thank you," and he replied: "Kissing your feet, I am at your service." Of course I was enchanted and thought of him during the day—his lovely voice and his charming blue eyes, just like a tiny cup of willow-pattern china I had had in my dolls' house years ago.

There was such gaiety in my face when I reached the class

that the girls asked: "Why do you look so happy? Are you in love?"

"Oh dear, no," I answered. "Love does not make the Spanish happy; it is then that their worries begin."

Madame Vancranden called me to the piano, looking me over from head to foot, without a suspicion of a smile. I turned to the class and announced my song as though to an audience. They looked at one another with surprise as if I had taken leave of my senses. Then I waited a good minute and a half before beginning, and Madame Vancranden, having struck the chord, remained with her hands in the air, looking like a begging dog. She said scathingly: "That you can do, if you ever become an artist." I felt like weeping, and it must have given a wonderful quality to my voice—for when I began: "Ah, my son, be thou blessed," the entire class looked down at their feet, and after I had ended I saw tears in Madame Vancranden's eyes, though she did not say a word.

I returned to my seat with my heart thumping so madly that I asked permission to leave the class and went into the corridor and wept. One of the girls opened the door and came towards me. "I want to tell you how gloriously you sang; we all felt it," she said. I thanked her and asked her to walk in front of me as we went back into the room, so that Madame would not see I had been crying. As we re-entered, all eyes were upon me and I dodged behind the friendly girl, who only covered a quarter of me, and sat down. Marguerite Aubert did not lift her eyes from her music.

A few days later, Madame Vancranden again reduced me to tears and after the class I went downstairs to compose myself and avoid the other girls. The concierge saw me and beckoned to me mysteriously. He looked like a delightful squirrel, so sly and charming. I went to him and he whispered in my ear: "A handsome gentleman is waiting outside to speak to you."

My heart leapt. "How can I get out without everyone seeing me?" I asked.

"Through my private garden," he answered, coughing loudly to cover his deceit. "No one goes there without my permission." Then he whispered: "Is he your lover, Mademoiselle?"

I replied: "Oh, no. I don't know who it is," and ran outside.

It was delightful walking through the perfectly planted garden where vegetables and flowers seemed to be whispering together in their own language, and I wished I could stay and compliment the concierge on his gardening and take time to look quietly at everything, but I was too impatient to see Louis—for who else could it be?

As I got to the little iron gate, with two beautiful trees bending over it to hide one from the road and indiscreet eyes, there he was, standing just outside.

He whispered: "I could wait no longer. I have walked every night past your window, and cursed the stupidity of the people who keep me away from you. When can I see you?"

I whispered in return: "I will meet you again this evening. Tell me where."

"At the corner at six o'clock in a *fiacre* with one horse and I'll try and find a white one, so that you'll know it's I."

"How lovely—but now you must go."

He kissed my hand and left me excited beyond words, my only regret that I was not looking my best after crying. I always envy women who can appear beautiful after bouts of tears, and wonder if their emotions can possibly be sincere.

I ran back through the garden and rushed down the wide marble corridor, my tears forgotten. I wished that everybody had left so that I could sing at the top of my voice. The drama of those large marble columns with gold leaves entwining them and the majestic marble staircase beyond gave me a sense of theatre that no stage has ever done.

I could hardly wait for the evening. I was going to meet "him" again, and wondered how much further we would travel on that circular path where youth and curiosity were wedded.

Just before six o'clock I went again into the concierge's garden and sat in a quiet corner to try and find calm in its peaceful beauty. My hat with its large purple feather shaded my face very kindly, my long coat made me seem much thinner than I really was. I hoped I would look beautiful in his eyes.

Suddenly I saw something moving at the end of the garden. It was he, peeping over the tall fence! I put my finger to my mouth to warn him not to call my name, then rushed joyfully to him, and I shall never forget his smile. He whispered: "I couldn't find a white horse." As I closed the gate, its ancient rusty hinges gave out a peculiar musical note: years afterwards I still remembered that strange sound.

I said: "Please let us go again somewhere out of the town where there are perfumed trees, and let us hurry, so that the birds won't have gone to bed." He took my hand and held it until we got to a nearby taxi. It was a masterful hand, strong and yet pliable, and not too warm.

The taxi-man asked our destination, but Louis said: "Drive on, and we will tell you." He drove with his head on one side, supposedly waiting for the address but really listening to what we were saying. I could not bear his impossible profile, that looked like a circus dog with a pipe in its mouth. The sight of it began to spoil my pleasure, so I said: "Let us walk a little." Louis told him to stop and out we got with a tremendous sense of relief.

We walked for some time without speaking, and then I said: "I am tired; let us sit and talk under this beautiful tree." We sat in harmonious silence, for how long I never knew. The delicious spacing of speech with the orchestra of one's senses playing their muted tunes is a language all its own.

The whole world seemed awake, as we were, to all that a night can inspire. Suddenly he bent down as if to kiss me, but instead slowly inhaled the perfume of my hair. I could hear his heart beating like a drum in the distance, and I thought we should not have come. Would I be able to hold at bay the emotions I felt surging within him? And what did I really desire? I regretted already the things I had not done but longed to do, and the promises I had made before leaving home were like handcuffs round my heart.

The sound of a horse's hooves broke the spell. A *fiacre* came unexpectedly round the bend and I jumped up without warning, flew as fast as my legs would carry me, and leapt into it, screaming with laughter. Louis laughed heartily too and ran rather self-consciously towards me, his fair hair blowing in the wind. I gave him my hand and pulled him into the carriage. I wanted to play and break down a little of his dignity. I had always loved playing with the little boys I knew at home, even fighting them with large cushions in Mamma's drawing-room.

The old cabman might have been the twin of the one who drove us before; all old coachmen look alike and their horses too. He joined in our fun, laughing merrily with us, and, unlike the taxi-man, he never asked where we wished to go, but just tickled his horse's ears with his whip and it broke into a trot, enough to move the wheels but not to upset the vibrations, like a donkey-cart I had when I was a child.

All too soon we arrived at a little inn built above a flowing brook. It was called *A la Truite Heureuse* and I wondered why, when people only went there to eat them. We entered and were met by the most delicious smell of hot olive oil. Belgians with large napkins tied round their necks, with the entire menu inscribed on them in food, were eating and making loud noises of appreciation. The merriest of inn-keepers came towards us with such a huge stomach that Falstaff would have looked consumptive in comparison. He

placed us at a table in the corner of the room, which was entirely lighted by little oil lamps. There was no noise, no mechanical music, just the soft murmur of the voices of the people in love, or those who, though in love no longer, yet still loved; a romantic habit which in Latin countries keeps couples together to the end of time.

Louis ordered a most epicurean dinner, looking at me for approval, and I was delighted that he knew exactly how to order. It is such a sign of intelligence and breeding and commands immediate respect from a head waiter or *restaurateur*. We drank the most delectable wine called Vouvray Sec, almost like champagne but with more body and more deceitful; it did not sparkle but it certainly intoxicated. The loaf of bread was so long that it rested on two tables like a bridge, and the pats of butter had little trout imprinted on them with drops of fresh dew coming out of their eyes; I told Louis they were relations of the fish we were going to eat and were weeping for their brothers. I had never in my life tasted such food, and the beauty with which it was served and the lovely quality and smell of the linen napkins, that had been washed in the river and pounded with stones, all enhanced my pleasure. We ate copiously and were completely absorbed in each other.

The time flew, and I had to say at last: "We must go." A sudden sadness overcame me. Would there never come a day when I would be free to stay sitting and talking, or not talking, as long as I wanted? Would I ever see this enchanted place again? I might have to leave the Conservatoire in disgrace if I failed in the examination, or go home for lack of funds. Louis noticed I had become depressed and took my hand, telling me that nothing was so important as I was making it, and he was my friend, who only desired my happiness. He was not a spontaneous person, so each pondered word had importance. I am exactly the opposite and have managed to be spontaneous most of my life. It is a good

gift though it sometimes leads one along jungled paths, and I am the only gardener who understands the tropical vegetation of my often entangled mind.

We walked for a long time in the inn garden under a glorious moon, that looked like a strange painting I had seen of a great Italian courtesan. She had a macabre wisdom in her face and a cruel smile—and so had the moon. We heard running water in the distance and I said: "Let us go down to the brook; I want to dip my toes in it."

"That is not good for the digestion," he answered, and I had to laugh, thinking how Latin he was.

In the brook the black trout were swimming peacefully like tired souls who had committed suicide and found their oasis at last. I sat on the mossy bank and took off my shoes and stockings. I would have loved to lie there on the soft turf instead of going back to my prosaic little bamboo bed, but my feet began to get numb and called me back to reason. I would not put on my stockings again and climbed the bank, Louis holding my shoes in one hand, his other hand in mine.

Driving home, I said to him: "I think I will not see you again until I have either lost you for ever or won you completely; I am so unsure of myself." He did not answer, which both charmed and irritated me.

When we parted, he again kissed my hands, both of them, "not to make either jealous," he said, and I offered him my forehead. He kissed it gently, but his lips did not descend to mine as I had hoped—yet feared—they might. It was better so, for once the great gates of desire are opened, no locksmith in the world can close them again, and the path beyond is treacherous, intricate and full of snares.

Next morning, Marguerite, her eyes full of curiosity, said to me: "We missed you last night," and I answered:

"How kind of you. I had a wonderful time. My brother's diplomat friend has returned."

"Oh, is he staying long?"

"I hope so."

"And will we have the pleasure of meeting him?"

"I hope that too, but it is difficult to ask diplomats the length of their stay; their lives are so secretive."

"Does one have to be a diplomat for that?"

"Who should know better than you?" I retorted, and she blushed.

I had made up my mind to be frank with Madame Aubert and explain that my life and future were my own, and other things I had carefully rehearsed, but the opportunity did not come. When she appeared at the breakfast-table, she was all smiles and even passed me the toast twice, when as a rule she put the rack out of sight so that I should think there was none left. She had received a letter from two of my English girl friends, saying they were coming to Brussels to study painting and French and asking about her *pension* terms. I was overjoyed at the idea of having two allies from home to support me, and she was delighted at the prospect of making more money, indirectly through me, so no questions about the previous night were asked or answered. But, happy as I was to think that my friends might join me, I felt exhausted before starting work and loitered in the park that had become my garden, unable to hurry, even if I were late and scolded. Still, better to have the fatigue now than on the day of the examination. The day I am to sing, I usually feel drugged. I would like to sleep for hours, look at my bed with yearning, and would pay the entire fee I am to receive just to lie down and forget the world. This is a form of nerves that can never be cured; yet when one goes on the stage, still feeling drugged, when the soul begins to speak and sweat covers one's brow, one is released; beauty daunts fear.

At the door of the class-room, I stood for a minute trying to concentrate and prayed for help, then forced myself to enter. Madame Vancranden asked me to begin the class. I

had never done this before and it was a compliment. She was putting me on my mettle before the other students, who knew so much more technically than I. I had not practised and wondered how I was going to sing my great aria at nine in the morning with sleep still in my soul, but I went to the piano like a soldier, looked up at the wonderful picture of Leonardo on the wall, thought of all his sufferings and began.

I sang with sudden inspiration, and afterwards Madame Vancranden said: "Well, there is something in you, D'Alvarez, there is even a great deal. I hope you do that half as well when the time comes."

I was overcome, and almost sat on the floor instead of on the bench next to Marguerite, who might have been a statue: I could read on her eyelids the expression she was trying to hide. She was already fighting me as though we were professionals, and there was no sisterly love left on her side. It made me sad, and I became conscious of all the nettles I should have to walk through to reach my goal. Would I be strong enough not to feel the stings? I wondered.

At the end of the class, Madame Vancranden kept me back, and I could see that she wanted to say more than she had. I stood and waited, feeling embarrassed. She asked: "What are you wearing for the examination?" but I sensed it was not what she had meant to say. I told her about my organdie dress and she seemed surprised and said: "Well, you will certainly be the most modestly dressed of them all."

"That does not disturb me," I answered, "because, if I am a failure, I won't be a presumptuous one, and I feel that organdie is a material with mysticism in it, and I hope people will feel that about my singing too."

She frowned confusedly, but shook hands with me for the first time, and I fancied—perhaps rather wistfully—that, had there not been girls lingering in the doorway, she would have kissed me. I felt I had at last conquered her hostility. Was it my singing or the organdie dress? I shall never know.

Next day I directed my steps towards the town to collect my accessories. I went first to the little shop in the very narrow street for my longed-for diadem. Lily-of-the-valley was Mamma's favourite flower. As I arrived, the old man was on his doorstep, smoking an enormous pipe almost as big as his head. I was fascinated by his carpet slippers, embroidered with bright red roses and spinach-green leaves, and told him so. He laughed heartily and asked was I joking? They were the most ordinary slippers one could possibly buy, he said.

"I love them because I see beauty in them, so the price is unimportant," I answered.

"How wise you are! I will try to get you a pair," he chuckled, "but not for your *début*."

His little mouse-wife came from the inner room to see what the laughter was about, and I asked her if she had remembered her promise.

"But of course!" she answered. "My husband has made the crown specially for you, and I think you will like it." And a cardboard box was carried towards me by them both, not because it was so heavy, but because of their excitement in anticipation of my delight. They opened the lid as though they expected a rabbit to spring out, and I trembled lest I should see the wrong flower on the wrong-shaped wreath; but when at last it appeared from innumerable paper wrappings, it was perfection. Crystal dewdrops were added to the lilies-of-the-valley to make it seem a diamond diadem, for the old man said he was sorry, he could not agree that it should be so "virginal," as he considered that I looked like a queen.

His wife tapped him on the shoulder and said: "Don't give her ideas; she is a young lady of good family and must not have her head stuffed with nonsensical grandeurs; leave them for the girls of lesser distinction and morals." And, turning to me, she added: "We are both going to hear you sing, and we will tell you what we really think of you."

I asked how much I owed for the diadem, and a touching smile illuminated their faces. They said they would like to offer me this small gift as an aid towards my success, for they had had a daughter, whom they had lost, and she too had wanted to be a singer, and had looked a little like me. But when I saw her picture, I was horrified and felt I would lose courage if that was what I looked like to other people.

The old lady ran down a dark passage into a room from which came all sorts of lovely smells of food, and returned with a small white glass bottle and told me that whenever I felt nervous, I must take a teaspoonful of the contents and it would calm me at once. I remember to this day the taste of that white nerve-tonic that looked like water. It was called *Eau des Carmes*, and was made by a certain order of monks who had never sold their secret, and it had a mysterious, mystic strength within it. I thanked my hostess and said: "It will give me courage to feel you and your husband are in the hall, for you have proved you are my friends, and I want you to see me in my lily-of-the-valley crown with the beautiful dewdrops."

Then the old couple said goodbye with the tenderest of smiles, waving to me from their doorstep, and I left with many regrets, feeling as though I had found long lost relations.

Next I had to fetch the *moiré* sash and satin shoes that I had taken to the dyer's. It had begun to drizzle, the shop was far away and I longed to take a taxi, but my will-power and empty purse were my jailers, and on I walked. The streets were sad and deserted. I felt like an orphan, and the fear of the examination loomed like a ghost at every corner. Why had I undertaken so nerve-racking a career? But then, what is easy, if one puts soul and integrity into it? And what joy it is to achieve success in the face of struggle!

The poor dogs were having a difficult time trying to pull

their little carts with enormous milk-cans in them on the slippery roads, and the drivers were none too kind, lifting large whips and threatening them. Their tragic eyes looked round for protection and sympathy. I could not bear it and reprimanded one man for his cruelty; then, running into the middle of the road, pushed his cart up the hill to the amazement of the passers-by. I was oblivious of my music, which fell into the mud, to the joy of the fat Belgian peasant to whom I was giving a lesson in humility. I asked him please to pick it up, which he did with arrogant reluctance. I was weeping with rage and sweating in the cold and rain, but thought to myself again, with a sneaking feeling of happiness, that if I could only get ill before the examination, it would be better than going through the ordeal. Anodynes have been found for the pains of the body, but none, alas, for those of the soul.

Exhausted from the climb up the hill, I trudged on. The road seemed endless and the reflection of the modest lights from the street-lamps made strange shadows on the path. I felt as though life were sympathising with me in my sadness, and when suddenly a large rainbow spread across the sky, to my superstitious nature it seemed a good omen.

I reached the dyer's at last. There was a tiny light burning in his window. I had no idea of the time; the day had seemed as long as life. I knocked timidly at the door, hoping I was not disturbing the evening meal, but that if I was, I would at least be invited to a plate of soup. The door opened, and the little man peered at me with suspicious eyes, but when he saw who it was, he smiled and said: "I did not expect you to-day; it is raining so hard."

I said: "I am sorry for being late, but I stopped to help the dogs pull their cart up the hill."

"Mademoiselle," he replied, "that is too human; you should do nothing so hard before your examination."

The delicious odour of food was more than I could stand,

and, as a gentle hint, I said: "I hope I have not disturbed your meal."

He answered: "You are not disturbing us, and if we were not such modest people we would ask you to partake of a bowl of *potage santé*."

I replied with alacrity that I was honoured that they should wish me to break bread with them, and followed him into a small dining-room where the steam from the soup-tureen completely hid the face of his fat, comfortable wife, who looked herself like a second soup-tureen, sitting behind an enormous round loaf of home-made bread. She seemed confused at seeing me, took her large napkin to wipe the sweat and soup from her lip, then dusted a chair with the same napkin so that I could sit down, saying at the same time a little inaudibly: "Be welcome."

I never enjoyed a meal more. There were protection and cosiness in that badly ventilated little room. On the wall were terrifying family portraits with crosses made of palm leaves stuck at the back, and photographs of dead relations tastefully adorned with pieces of their funeral wreaths. From the top of the wall hung a long streamer of crêpe with a military decoration. I had to keep my eyes on my food not to burst into tears or laughter; it was all so pathetic and Gallic to live thus with the dead.

The meal was wonderful in its simplicity and earthy quality. In the soup was every vegetable possible, with large pieces of floating meat, all seasoned so perfectly that it did not need pepper and salt. The old man disappeared suddenly, and returned with an enormous bottle of red wine, which he put on the oven to give it the right temperature, first bringing it towards me so that I might admire the cobwebs that had become wedded to the bottle with age. A cheese followed which perfumed the entire room. He pointed out that cheese was the necessary companion to wine, to which I agreed. To their great delight, I asked if I

might have a crust of the bread. They answered: "When one has teeth like yours, Mademoiselle, it must be a pleasure to gnaw on a crust, but, as we never go to dentists, we let our teeth drop out and eat the dough for the rest of our lives."

I said: "Did you enjoy the crust when you had teeth?" and the old man replied: "I don't remember."

I heard a clock ticking, very much in the distance after the miraculous red wine, and my feet seemed suddenly to swell and I wondered how I was going to get home. At last the old lady rose from her chair with great difficulty and said she would fetch the things she had dyed for me. First she washed her hands very carefully, then wiped them on her stomach with a patting movement, and I thought this must also be the reason for her digesting so well and quickly, for the wipings went on for quite a long time. Then she brought a box and took out the sash and the shoes with much tenderness, and they both stared into my face to see if I was pleased with the colour. The light of the room was so obscure I could hardly tell, but, even had it been the wrong green, I would not have had the heart to say so.

I was now so happy with the magic of the red wine that I thought of the examination without a tremor, and would have got up and faced any audience with complete courage. I was in the vineyards of the gods, in that mood in which all things seem possible. Yet, strange to say, if one takes any stimulant before going on to a platform, one's memory becomes fogged and one's creative powers blunted.

My host said he would not hear of my going home alone in the dark and he would walk with me to the bus. I was relieved, but he was old and I feared if he caught a cold in the rain he might not survive—then thought that all the wine he had drunk would protect him. As he opened the door, I saw to my joy that it had stopped raining. He had put on two coats and shouted to his wife at the back of the shop, didn't she think that one would be enough? She shouted back:

"No. Unbutton the top one, but keep it on just the same." He opened it meekly, put his umbrella over one arm and asked me to take the other, and we set out. He was so much shorter than I that I had to look down on the top of his head. He wore an intricate little cap with a tiny jet button on top and a very badly made button-hole, that allowed the button to escape. It was so charming and ridiculous that I had to comment on it. He thanked me for noticing it and with tremendous pride told me his wife had made it herself on their silver wedding day. "And," he said, "if I were not frightened of catching cold, I would show you the lining which is, perhaps, more beautiful still." I begged him not to do anything so dangerous as the damp was horrible. The French, Belgians, and Italians always wear a cap in bed if they catch a cold; and I have also seen Jewish men wear little silk caps that fit their heads so snugly that one feels they can expand or shrink according to their moods.

We arrived at the bus-stop where, on a solitary bench, sat several farmers and their wives with large bundles of butter and cheese, which they were carrying to the next market. They were all most kind and tried to make room for my voluptuous hips. I begged my companion to return home as those good people were going my way and he said he would, now that he knew I was safe.

I felt a loneliness as he left me. How near one can get to such simple people in a few hours! I thought over my evening and felt enriched by the hospitality of those two delightful shopkeepers. I wished the hall could be filled with all my modest friends, who seemed to love me at first sight, with no "pros and cons," having so little education but so much breeding of the heart.

The jingly bus came at last with an oil lantern in the corner, which competed in odour with the passengers' cheese. As we rattled on, I tried to make conversation with the peasants, but they all slept, sitting upright, looking like

mummies. I wondered if I was mad or had fallen into some strange shooting-gallery, but the smell of the cheeses brought me back to earth; they were much more alive than their owners.

When we reached our destination, the conductor shouted so loudly that all woke together, and, without rubbing their eyes, proceeded to smile, take their parcels, and tell me their destinations without asking mine. The conductor enquired if I knew how to get my connection. I explained where I lived and he told me I must hurry, as the last bus would be leaving. My heart leapt into my throat and I ran madly, to see it just moving off. In desperation I jumped on, throwing my music before me, and swung like an acrobat on the brass hand-rail, to the amazement of a young officer and his friend, who caught me by my coat and tried to hoist me up. With a supreme effort I landed on my toes on the step and experienced an exhilarating feeling of safety. We all laughed heartily, though I had little breath left to do anything but flop down on the green cushion inside, forgetting my music and my precious sash, which I had tucked into it. It had rolled out on to the muddy platform, but fortunately had been wrapped with such care that no harm had befallen it.

The young officer was charming and when we alighted he begged me to allow him to escort me to my door, which I did with pleasure as the street was dull and badly lit. He asked if I were a singer, and I told him: "Not yet." He said he had noticed me often as he rode past my house, then saluted, took out his card, and added: "If I can ever be of use to you, please call on me." There was great sincerity in his voice and I said: "Thank you. If you can, I will."

We were at the door and I began to whisper as I was frightened of making too much noise and having to explain this naive encounter to Madame Aubert, who would find it so full of sin. We shook hands. I felt great character in his hand-shake and liked him. He was in the cavalry, I noticed, his spurs gleaming in the light of the lamp. I told him I

would like him to come and hear me sing and he said he would go tomorrow and take his ticket, but hoped he would have the honour of seeing me again before then. I said that was impossible, I must work and tremble with fear alone; but I promised I would see him after the examination, if I felt I had been a success. He clicked his heels and kissed my hand with the unselfconscious elegance of the Latin, and, as always, I felt a thrill at the homage this pays to a woman, and wished it were done all over the world—in England and America too.

Next morning, I woke up feeling much less rested than when I went to sleep, and longed with all my heart to stay in bed, pull the covers over my head and forget the world. Even the smell of the stewing coffee could not excite me. I felt I had caught a cold. Why had I pushed the cart up the hill? The dog had dragged that same cart up that same hill for years, I was sure. Words Mamma had once said to me came back in large golden letters: "My beloved child, remember that even a heart must be disciplined." How true. At school I hated arithmetic, but now I realise it is the basis of every art and one cannot escape from it any more than from the idea of death. All the same, I know I shall go to my grave without having learned Mamma's lesson.

I got up unwillingly, and could not see life in any colours but dark greys and blacks. I longed to run away, but had nowhere to run to. I could not ring up Louis. I did not know his telephone number and was really glad, as I knew that if I did I would regret it later. I even left unopened a letter from Mamma I found in the hall, just kissed it and tucked it into my bodice. I was afraid of the contents. This habit of not opening letters remained with me for years and could never be explained. I think it was based on the fear of her dying unexpectedly, that partly ruined my joy in living.

At the Conservatoire, the girls seemed delighted to see me so depressed and were almost kind, asking if I did not feel

well and telling me not to get ill before the examination, which, I was sure, was what they were secretly hoping.

When it came to my turn in the class, I asked Madame Vancranden if I might sing an aria from *Carmen*. She raised her bushy eyebrows and enquired: "Do you know it?"

"I hope so," I answered. "But I must wake up, Madame, and something I really know would not need enough effort to whip my circulation to frothing point." She looked at me amazed, but said nothing.

I stood and glared round the class like a bull in the ring, and then, with temperament that came from I knew not where, sang in tones of different shades of purple: "*Quand je vous aimerai*." I had a cold and a temperature, of course, which gave me the courage and the inspiration. The whole class sat up, aghast at my daring, and through the haze of my emotions my ego rose to such heights that the examination and my fears became insignificant. This was "The Day" to me, and what might come afterwards had no importance.

When I ended, there was complete silence. Everybody was looking at everybody else. Madame Vancranden looked only at the piano-keys. Before she could say: "Thank you" and "You can leave," I swept out of the room, holding the door ajar just long enough for them all to wonder what would happen next.

I flew down to the basement and begged the caretaker's wife for a cup of very hot coffee. She said: "Your eyes are flashing like lamps. What has happened?" "I am ill," I answered, "but I know I am an artist; to-day I have been born." At this she held my pulse and injected an enormous thermometer into my mouth; took it out, looked at it, and said: "You have fever; get home, my child, if you want to sing on the great day." "This is just what I was longing for," I thought.

I went back to the class and asked Madame Vancranden if I might leave, because I ached all over and felt a day's rest

was necessary. "Certainly," she said, "but don't fail me on the day of days." "Not if it is in my power, Madame, but is it?" I replied.

As I walked home, I felt like a millionaire with too much money to spend. I had the whole day to myself. Spring was in the air and I noticed the tiny glossy buds making their appearance, and the strange, dull bark of the trees. I walked slowly with cold shivers running up and down my back. I wished there was somebody who really cared what happened to me, to prepare my bed and put on the table next to it innumerable bottles of medicine that would never be touched, but would make one feel better by just being there. I remembered cupboards at home filled with bottles, many with corks that had never been taken out. Papa used to make scenes about them, and also insisted on our finishing the contents of bottles that had been opened, even when we were well again—to teach us a lesson that we never forgot, that nothing should be wasted in life, not even medicine.

On the doorstep I found Madame Aubert. Very short-sighted, she was trying to insert her key into the lock, which she should have known by heart after all those years. She looked at me curiously, and I told her I was ill. She answered: "I hope you are better for the examination," but seemed delighted at the thought that I might not compete, then, softening for a moment, she asked if there was anything she could do. I said: "If I can have my meals sent up, I will go to bed and keep warm," and she graciously consented.

The sun was shining in my little room, showing up its friendly shabbiness, so right for a student. Its modesty and quaint shape were a joy to me, and I had added little touches that spelled "home." With my meagre pennies, I had bought one or two small statues, one of the Madonna and one of a little lamb with real fur, which I used to wash every time I washed my hair. He was fluffy and human, and seemed to follow the Madonna with love. She being so great an

influence in my life, he and I had much in common.

The black cat had left again and had not been back for weeks. I was worried and wondered if I had lost my luck. I hope one day to be able to eradicate these gypsy superstitions from my nature, but all artists have them: it is part of their enchanting unbalance.

I enjoyed undressing in the daytime, filling my hot-water bottle and promising myself the most delicious rest. I had forgotten my mother's letter, and as I took off my dress it fell to the floor. I picked it up tenderly and her perfume rushed towards me. How much a part of her was everything she touched! To this day, I have a silk mantilla that was hers, and she wept and laughed so often under the lovely lace that I feel something of her has remained within its folds: when I am unhappy, I wrap it round me and am soothed and renewed once more.

I got into bed and lay on the enormous pillow with a sense of well-being. My throat was hot and my pulse quick but I would ignore them. "What was to be would be," as Carmen sings. I hoped I was going to be a great Carmen one day, so should begin by using her sayings. *Arrive qui plante.*

I opened my letter. There was a petal of a rose inside. I kissed it until it lost its colour and shape, for Mamma too had kissed it and I was taking its message. In the letter, to my unspeakable joy, she told me that as the months passed she missed me more and more and longed to join me for a few weeks and—oh, miracle of miracles—perhaps after the examination she might arrange to come. I could hardly read the words. It was like a fairy-tale that might come true, though I could not believe Papa would ever let her leave his side. I pressed the letter to my heart, turned over and fell into a dreamless sleep until morning, not even hearing the maid when she brought my—for once—unwanted food.

My cold evaporated as quickly as it had come and the days

now passed uneventfully, the only dramas those within my own heart, and presumably the hearts of the other students, but of those, with the egoism of youth and the artist—for are not all artists perpetually young?—I was oblivious. Inexorably, the tight-rope of anticipation, fear, and excitement led, it seemed in a flash, to the agonising night before the examination.

After a tense, atmospheric evening, Marguerite and I went early to our rooms, she showing no emotion, I hardly uttering a word. When I reached the haven of my bed, the storm broke. I burst into floods of tears, calling out to my mother, begging her to help me. It was too much for me to bear alone. Was a career to be forever this mental anguish? If so, I wanted to give it all up and fly back to the comfort of her arms. And how ill I felt! My throat ached again unbearably. Would I be able to sing a note next day? My lids burned from the tears I had shed, and I could hardly close my eyes. I prayed fervently to the Madonna and Her lamb that my throat might be cured and I might be given strength, then tossed feverishly from side to side, longing for the sleep that eluded me, as a succession of waking nightmares photographed themselves on the ceiling from my subconscious mind. But at long last nature with her charity came to my aid. To the accompaniment of small chirps from the birds outside, I fell asleep and the only dream I remember is of making my *début* before kings and queens and having forgotten my words.

A gentle tap at the door roused me. At once I was more than awake. It was the maid bringing me a large cup of black coffee and a long piece of bread with lumps of butter she had not had time to spread, but it floated in the coffee as I “dunked” the bread and soothed my throat, which seemed to have been cured as by a miracle by my prayers to the Madonna and Her lamb.

After a quick bath and great splashings to bring circulation back to my body, a new force seemed to enter me. I was overtired yet full of supernatural energy. It tried to pretend to myself that it was my wedding day and I did not have to sing but must just make myself look as attractive as possible.

My hair was so full of electricity it almost flew out of the window. I could do nothing with it, so took a clothes-brush with the strongest bristles in one hand and my hair-brush in the other and forced it to obey. It was not the success I had hoped for, but, after arranging it in a large jug handle "*à la Josephine*" and putting on the diadem of lilies-of-the-valley with their dewdrops glistening in the morning light like resident tears, I was not too dissatisfied with the result. Then I took out and admired my organdie frock with its large marguerites embroidered by the nuns with so much patience and love, and the thought of their devotion gave me a sudden sense of calm. I dressed quickly, then tied the green sash as dramatically as possible and, when I put on the green shoes, found to my joy they had shrunk so much from the dyeing that I could think of nothing but the pain. I carefully took them off to carry them with me, so that the effect would be as poignant when I put them on again to sing.

It was a cold but glorious morning. I would wear my little squirrel coat with its beautiful chartreuse lining that had been such a friend to me with its tender warmth. A little of my mother's perfume remained in it lingeringly to remind me that in some mystic way she was going to use me to carry on what she herself had longed to do.

I crept downstairs like a thief. I did not want to talk to anybody in the house but the kind little weasel. When I appeared at the top of the kitchen stairs to show myself for her approval, she knelt down and said: "*Mademoiselle*, I thought you were the *Madonna* appearing to me!" True the stairs were very dark, but her attitude after that day always had a certain reverence which I found it hard to live up to.

When I opened the front door, there were no cabs in sight, only young Guards officers riding their beautiful horses for exercise. I wondered, did it need more courage to sing in front of an audience or to master those splendid animals, which insisted on standing on their hind legs for no apparent reason but horse fun? I saw in the distance a *fiacre* with the cabman watching for his prey. With an operative gesture I hailed him. He came with the speed of an ambulance, looking at me suspiciously. But when I gave him the address of the Conservatoire, he nodded his head as if to say: "Just another artist." I felt flattered. It was something to have the physique before the achievement—it always helps. He naturally chose the most roundabout way to the Conservatoire and protracted my agony. I longed to be any of the people passing in the street or even the dog pulling its milk-cart.

At last we reached the tall, dignified building, which seemed to greet me with a frown. For some intuitive reason I chose the side door. When the caretaker's wife saw me, she rose with a secretive gesture and pushed me into her bedroom, where she examined me from head to foot with a mingled look of approval and mystery.

"Stay here until the very last moment," she whispered loudly. "Looking as you do, the contrast between you and the others will make it too difficult for you."

I did not know if this was a compliment, but it did not add to my calm, and my little pearl necklace jumped up and down on my neck to the rhythm of my excited heart.

My kind friend left me. I waited fearfully, alone in that strange sanctuary, until a tap at the door brought me to my feet. Then I took a hurried glance at myself in the dingy wall-mirror and was horrified at the distorted, death-white image I saw there. I was trembling with fear but pulled myself together. This could not be the end of all things, I told myself. Is not creative suffering the stained glass window

through which one looks at life and the future? I breathed deeply, and reluctantly left the shelter of the sombre, protective little room.

I gave my coat a last affectionate pat as I deposited it in the cloak-room—oh, to get into it once more; that would mean that judgment had been passed—and walked with outward calm into the waiting-room, where I saw to my satisfaction that the other girls in their showy dresses were almost as pale as I. But they knew so much more. I was frightened because I knew so little and hoped feverishly that it had been explained to the audience that I was not competing for the gold medal but only to show I had sufficient talent to be allowed to stay in the Conservatoire.

The waiting-room was cold and unfriendly, as all waiting-rooms seem to be, whether in a station, a prison, or a palace, because of that horrible thing called “waiting.” I detest it always. Every moment of that waiting seemed an hour. We sat in silence, too paralysed to talk.

At last the first student’s name was called. Each was called out as her entrance came, and each candidate rose in turn and passed through the double doors at the end of the room, which closed behind her: waiting to be beheaded could not have been more austere or terrifying. We could hear her muted voice as she sang, and the varying applause as she rejoined us.

When I heard my name being murdered by the usher, I stood as erect as I could, but something seemed to have happened to my knees, they shook so violently. The hostile eyes of all the students were watching me. I had to control myself. The large doors were thrown open, and with a supreme effort I passed through them on to the stage of the beautiful little theatre, called a concert hall, with its rococo gold boxes and red velvet seats, that still retained the echoes of the many great artists who had passed through those same doors.

A sea of faces appeared before me. I had not been told where the members of the Royal Family were sitting and it was instinct only that directed my eyes to their box. I made a deep curtsy to them, then glanced at the box of the gentlemen of the jury and made a second, but stiffer, curtsy. This seemed to amuse them; probably the other students had just run on and begun to sing.

Then I looked at the conductor. I had only met him once at a rehearsal with the piano and had only sung with that before. He gave me a comforting smile, then lifted his baton and the strains of the great orchestra floated through the hall that might have been empty, it was so still.

When I heard that glorious music being played by those many artists as though by one man, my fear miraculously left me. I felt I was lifted on waves that would never break, and with the first phrase, "Ah, my son, be thou blessed," I forgot my youth and inexperience and offered through my voice, with all the emotion God had given me, the maternity that in life I would never know.

The great waves bore me triumphantly to the end of the aria and as I finished on the same lovely phrase with which I had begun, I lifted my arms instinctively in benediction and stood for the breadth of a second in complete silence on some lonely planet, I knew not where.

The silence held and then suddenly came the deafening crash of applause. I thought the roof had fallen. I could not imagine at first they were applauding me. I bowed, and bowed again, then held up my hand to ask them to be still. I wanted to tell them I would return, but the words would not come. I just bowed again and left the stage.

The doors closed behind me, but the applause continued. Madame Vancranden appeared suddenly through a side door and told me that I could not go back and bow again; it was against the rules. I said: "Won't they think I am not appreciative?" and she answered: "You need not worry

about that." The other girls looked at me like strangers with hatred in their eyes, and Marguerite did not come near me. I stood in a corner, huddled in my mother's mantilla longing to go home to bed, to her photograph and my rosary beads, to try and forget the world and its cruelties in sleep. Why should they treat me so? I could not help being what I was. And art is not a question of oneself; it is the gods who possess one for those brief moments and work their will.

Soon it was Marguerite's turn to sing. I made a great effort, went up to her, took her hands and said: "I am going to pray that you will win the medal." She smiled superficially and said: "I don't believe in prayer." She looked so beautiful that I wondered why the girls did not hate her too, but she had not that something in her that the French call the "sacred fire," which one can neither buy nor learn. I watched her as she left the room. Her walk was poetry, but her face was set like a mask. I loved her in spite of her self-centred, inhibited nature and sincerely wanted her to win the medal. But I listened to her singing and was unmoved. How strange that her walk and her beauty should appeal to me so much and that her voice should leave me cold. She was not an ocean, but a lake with no tides to her nature. The audience applauded her politely, I thought, but with restraint. When she returned to the waiting-room, she looked over my head, and I realised she did not want me to go near her, so I stared at the floor.

My turn to sing again was drawing near. I went to the glass: it was kinder than the caretaker's and I was almost satisfied. My face was shining, and in those days I did not use powder, so I had to wipe it with my handkerchief with a large lace border, which scratched my nose and made it quite red.

Most of the girls would be giving their encores after I had finished mine. "Thank God," I thought, "I can disappear without having to meet them again." I put on my gloves,

tidied my hair, and stood very near the door so that I would not lose my breath walking across the long room and the stage.

My name was called. As the large doors opened, a hot smell of humanity came towards me and I was almost faint from the lack of air. The audience gave me a wonderful reception and many of the artists of the orchestra smiled at me kindly. I was singing for my second aria the beautiful "My heart opens at thy sweet voice" from *Samson and Delilah*, a striking contrast to the Mother in *The Prophet*, for Delilah was a great mistress. To-day it is considered hackneyed, but I love it still.

The conductor gave me a signal and in his expression I read: "Do as well as you did before; we expect it." Once again the orchestra swept into life. The strains of those amorous violins were intoxicating. I was enthralled by the quality of their tone and completely lifted to the heavens. My voice soared, warm and passionate. I was oblivious of the audience and almost ecstatic with the emotion I felt. I became the mistress; the Mother had disappeared.

As I ended and held the note as long as my heart could support it, there was in it almost a sob of relief and joy for all I had been able to give. I could not hear what was being shouted. Some of the medical students, who always attend these auditions, had climbed on to their seats, throwing their caps into the air; the Royal Family were applauding enthusiastically. I tried to leave the stage without turning my back on the audience, but they called me again and again, and at last I opened my arms and said on the loudest speaking tone I could muster: "I thank you one and all."

Then a gaunt man appeared from nowhere, kissed my hand and, as in a dream, led me to the box of the gentlemen of the jury, who all looked equally funereal. They rose as one man—and, the dream continuing, presented me with the gold medal.

I was stupefied, but cried: "Gentlemen, there is some mistake. I was not competing. I am not yet an artist. I had only to prove I was worthy to remain here to study many more years to become one."

They answered: "You are an artist, and we are awarding you this medal with only one condition, that you remain in the Conservatoire to study for another two years."

I curtsied in reply. I could not speak.

Then the Director of the Conservatoire came forward, took my hand and kissed it. The audience was still applauding. I bowed to them again, showing them the gold medal, then left the stage, still in the dream.

I had only one overmastering thought, to avoid meeting the other students. I felt dishonest in some strange way. I had done nothing wrong, yet it seemed somehow that I had stolen something that did not belong to me but to one of those who had striven and studied for years to earn it, and I was robbed of the tremendous joy that should have been mine on that memorable day. I would fly away before anyone could speak to me. I would pull down the blinds in my room and my life, and in the darkness seek consolation.

I slipped through the side door through which Madame Vancranden had appeared, ran downstairs and asked the caretaker's wife to fetch my coat from the cloak-room, as I wanted to leave without seeing anyone.

"But, Mademoiselle, you must wait," she cried. "If I were you, I would be the proudest girl in the land. Why, you could go to the Opera and they'd give you a contract tomorrow."

"Oh, no," I answered, "I must work much, much more. To-day I have won with my emotions: I must learn to serve with technique"—which, of course, she could hardly understand.

"I will fetch your coat," she said—and went out very gently as though not to wake her child.

She came back with a face full of unhappiness, almost of fear. Her hands were behind her back.

"Mademoiselle," she said, "you cannot wear your coat."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Look, Mademoiselle," she answered.

And from behind her back she held out my beloved coat, Mamma's last gift before I left home, its sleeves cut out, its beautiful lining smeared with dirt and filth, horrible beyond words. I could hardly speak.

"But who—who—?" I managed to whisper.

"It has been done by one of your jealous rivals," she replied.

I sank into a chair and burst into hysterical tears. The poor woman was almost overcome.

"I can clean it, but the sleeves are missing," she said.

"And—and my hat?" I sobbed. "It is green, with a purple feather."

"There is a green hat—but no purple feather," she answered, "only a quill." They had shaved my glorious feather that I had paid little sums through a whole year to possess. I had walked miles to save enough to buy that coveted feather.

I could not stop crying or rise from my chair, and asked the kind woman if I might stay with her a little longer. She said that the room was mine until I wished to leave, as she and her husband had loved me from the first day I had smiled at them, and made them feel that they were friends, not just employees—unlike the other girls, who never even passed the time of day with them. I was a little consoled by her tenderness and put my arms round her neck and kissed her wrinkled forehead.

Then she left and locked the door after her, which gave me a mingled feeling of protection and fear. I was stunned by the horror of what a human being can descend to and wondered why animals were made to walk on four legs, when people who walk upright can be so much lower than they.

When the caretaker returned, she brought a little glass of Eau de Carmes to settle my nerves. "But how will I go home without my coat?" I asked. "If my shawl is not too humble for you, Mademoiselle, it is clean; I have worn it only once before—on my wedding day," she replied and, with a light in her eyes, she put the key in the door of her creaking old wardrobe, and, after unwrapping many papers, drew out a lovely Paisley shawl. I had never seen a more beautiful one even in my mother's wardrobe, but of course the perfume was very different; this one smelt strongly of camphor and things that preserve. She wrapped it tenderly round me. I kissed her again and went out by the side door, feeling poor and forsaken and alone. Was all my life going to be thus, I wondered—triumph and then despair?

I did not hail a cab but walked through the bitter cold, shivering under the shawl, hoping I would get really ill and perhaps die. The thought of meeting Madame Aubert and Marguerite terrified me. It would be a more difficult fight than that with the students.

In my room nothing had been touched, and the reception of my Madonna and Her lamb gave me a sense of peace. I undressed and climbed into bed. When the dinner-bell rang, I knew that I could not eat, and hoped they would not call me. I turned out the light and saw the moon floating towards the open window, serene and soothing. There was a presence in the room. Was it from Mamma's picture and her radiant smile, full of confidence and without reproach? A tap came on the door. It was the little weasel, standing in a flannel nightdress of such thickness that had she been thrown down the stairs by Madame Aubert, she would not have been bruised. She held a plate of cold food, saved from her own portion I felt sure, and offered it to me like a bunch of flowers. I thanked her gratefully, but refused it and she disappeared on her square, strong feet as quietly as she had come.

I floated uneasily between sleep and another planet until morning and, when I rose, was so bruised, mentally and physically, that I could hardly stand and thought perhaps I was really going to die. But the spring sunshine brought healthier ideas. I felt a coward, and determined that, come what might, with the help of God I would fight through. And suddenly I had an inspiration. I would return the gold medal with a dramatic gesture. Then the hatred and jealousy would be appeased and I could go back and study calmly in all humility as before. It would be a wonderful solution, for I detested the golden symbol for all the ugliness it had brought into my life.

Before I had finished combing my hair, a perfunctory knock on the door was followed by the entrance of Madame Aubert herself. With a hypocritical smile, and without congratulations or enquiries, she announced that Madame Vancranden had called to see me. With a galloping pulse I said I was afraid my legs would not carry me downstairs—would she kindly ask Madame to come up? She snapped her lips without answering and retired. I climbed back into my high bed and waited nervously. What would Madame say to me? And what was Madame Aubert saying to her now?

When Madame Vancranden entered, her cold grey eyes took in at a sweep the entire room; true, it was not very large. I waited for her to speak first, and to my amazement she said: "I have news for you. You have been appointed Court Singer for a year. Of course, you are only a beginner, and it is unheard of for us to allow you to accept the offer, but in the unusual circumstances of yesterday, we are obliged to do so."

I was overcome but answered: "I thank you, Madame, and feel that what happened yesterday was sent by Heaven as a consolation for all I have suffered these endless months."

Blushing redder than I had even seen her, she replied: "I was not aware that you were unhappy or that anything was wrong."

"Since I first came to the Conservatoire, nearly everyone has been against me," I retorted, "and what chance have you ever given me to speak to you about myself? You only taught me when you had to do so." And with these words I burst into tears.

A look of humanity came into her eyes for the first time. She laid her hand on my burning forehead and spoke quite gently: "You should be the happiest girl in the world. Yesterday's success and to-day's honour with hard work should open all doors to a great career. But the strain has been too much for you. Rest until you are completely well. Then we will discuss everything further."

I picked up the gold medal lying by the bed and said: "Please will you return this with my profound gratitude to the judges and tell them the students made me feel I had stolen it from them."

She answered: "I will call the class to-morrow and put all this straight. Your instinct was greater than your knowledge, that is true, and the judges were a little carried away by so much creativeness in one so young. It was unjust to the other students, but not to art, and I will not take back the medal. It would be an insult to the Royal Family and to the judges."

She rose to go, hesitated, then repeated: "You should be the happiest girl in the world."

"Not as things have turned out, Madame," I answered sadly.

I longed to tell her about my fur coat but felt it was not the moment, and longed to kiss her but did not dare. She opened the door and almost knocked Madame Aubert down the stairs. The latter gave a peculiar scream and said: "I was on my way to ask if you would like a little refreshment."

Madame Vancranden answered coldly, turning to me: "Here is the one who needs it. This child is not at all well. She must stay in bed, at least for to-day."

Like a tortoise smiling, Madame Aubert replied: "I am sorry. What is the cause?" She had, of course, overheard the entire conversation.

They left me and, delighted to remain in bed, I lay and thought of the honour that had been bestowed on me and the complications it might bring, of what they would say at home, and of Madame Vancranden's kindness which had touched me deeply. At last I fell into a deep sleep and dreamt that I was being ushered into the Music Room at the Palace, wearing my fur coat tacked together with the caretaker's shawl as a skirt.

Next morning I felt better, though by no means myself, and determined that I must face the enemy and go back to the class. I looked in the mirror and felt that my exaggerated pallor befitted the occasion.

Everyone was seated at the breakfast-table when I entered and looked up with starched smiles.

"Is there room for me?" I asked angelically.

"Certainly—if your ego has not swollen," Marguerite replied.

"Now that you have won the gold medal," said Madame Aubert, "you must know more than anyone else, and will get an engagement for the Opera at once."

"Dear Madame Aubert," I replied, "I cannot digest sarcasm at meal-times, and I do not make plans—fate makes them for me." I looked down at my plate and no more was said. On it was a letter with a Belgian stamp. The address was in a bold, sensitive hand and my heart thumped as I opened it, conscious of the curious eyes that watched me. It was from Louis. He wrote that he had been present at my success, and must see me. Would I please telephone him immediately?—and he gave the number. I hesitated. I was tempted but felt so tired—too tired for admiration or criticism or more emotion. No, I would not telephone.

At the Conservatoire, I entered again by the caretaker's lodge and gratefully returned the shawl to its owner.

"What a wonderful perfume it has now. What is it?" she asked.

"Heartache," I answered.

"Can one buy it?"

"No, only live it."

"The coat is in a bad way, Mademoiselle," she said, as if it were alive. "I can patch it, but it won't be the same."

"Neither am I," I replied.

She warned me that the atmosphere in the class was stormy, and I walked up the marble stairs with trepidation. Before I could open the door, it was thrown wide by the cruellest girl of them all, who bowed down to the ground to me with mock respect. I accepted this with humour and bowed in return like Royalty, at which the class burst out laughing and the tension broke.

Madame Vancranden came forward and took me by the hand, then turned to the students and said: "Mesdemoiselles—I wish bygones to be bygones. At the examination Mademoiselle D'Alvarez's singing swept the judges right off their feet. She has now been chosen to be Court Singer for one year." Murmurs went round the classroom, like, I imagined, those in the Roman arena. Madame put up her hand to silence them.

"Mademoiselle D'Alvarez," she continued, "has accepted the situation with great humility. She has offered to return the gold medal to the judges, as she feels it does not belong to her by the orthodox rules of the Conservatoire. We cannot allow her to do this, but I admire her for her generous gesture and I ask you to do the same."

I looked towards Marguerite Aubert for a smile, but there was none, and I knew then I would never win back her affection. How much I had gained—and lost. I sat down in my usual seat and the girl next to me took my hand and said:

"Now we shall understand you better." Bells pealed in my heart.

After the class had broken up, Madame Vancranden called me and told me not to work any more that day, as I still looked far from well.

"We have cleared the atmosphere," she added; "yesterday is dead. This is a new beginning."

I thanked her for all she had done, then went down to the basement and ate my lunch alone. Many of the students came up to me and none referred to the fatal past. Afterwards I put on my hat and coat and went out. I still felt bruised from head to foot and decided to take a long walk through the park.

I walked, it seemed, for miles, through paths carpeted with every colour of autumn leaf. On I went without direction until at last I grew tired and wondered how I should ever reach home: I did not even know the way. All at once I heard a horse's hooves coming toward me, but did not look round until a voice exclaimed: "*Mademoiselle, la grande cantatrice!*" I turned, and to my amazement saw the young officer I had met in the bus, who had taken me to my door, the day I fetched my diadem.

"That I should meet you here to-day is too wonderful," he cried. "I was present at your *début* and wanted to write of my great admiration, but feared to get you into trouble with the ogre you live with."

I said: "I am so tired. I wish your horse was strong enough to carry us both, as they do in Spain."

"How did you manage to walk so far?" he asked.

"I did not realise—I was thinking."

"May I ask of what?"

"No, you may not; my thoughts are secret and shared with no one, especially somebody I do not know."

"But now that I have heard you sing I feel I know you very well, and I want to be your friend."

"First, you must deserve it. Tell me your idea of friendship and we will see."

He was very much amused by the challenge and proceeded to go into many details that had little to do with friendship but a lot to do with love, the eternal forbidden fruit in the heart and mind of every Latin. I pretended not to understand as much as I did and laughed at his gallantry. He said he was glad I had such a sense of humour off the stage, for on it I was drama itself and as I walked on had reminded him of the Victory of Samothrace. "You have chosen my favourite statue," I answered. "I would willingly give my life to find her head, but perhaps she is better without; it keeps one guessing."

He offered to let me ride his horse and said he would walk and hold the reins, but I told him of my terror of horses, and of how when I had a nightmare I saw my father's hansom cab flying down the street without a driver. He asked me to tell him about my parents, but I said: "Not to-day, I am utterly exhausted and want to lie on the ground and roll in those leaves, to cure myself of all I have been through."

He said: "It all sounds much too morbid for me. You must be gay. It's good for you—I will teach you." Then, losing his flippancy, he said gently: "You are over-tired. I am going to leave you here and get a car or something to take you home."

I said: "Don't leave the horse; I would not know how to talk to him, but I should like to drive back." Not having any money with me, I wondered how I would pay if it were a taxi, but felt I could not explain such sordid details. He said he would take the horse and be back in less than ten minutes.

I sat down on a lonely bench and waited. It was late and had grown chilly. I shivered and felt my fever had returned. Then the sun slipped mischievously from behind the clouds, and as I watched its flirtations with the indifferent trees I wondered: "Have the clouds passed for me too? Was Madame right? Perhaps this is really a new beginning. The stu-

dents will be kinder to me and I shall work with more confidence now. I will see Louis again—and this young officer, so gay and charming. My friends from England will be coming to join me—and perhaps the miracle may happen and Mamma will come too. Will she be proud of me? Will she feel I have done what she wanted me to do? Oh, if only I could talk to her! If only she were here with me now.”

And suddenly—was it the fever?—I seemed to be standing on the stage again. I heard again the strains of the great orchestra swelling triumphantly. And above them I heard the music of her beloved voice—and yet somehow it was my own voice—singing her benediction: “Ah, my daughter, be thou blessed.”



PART THREE

The Prima Donna





Brussels—Paris



MY FEVERISH, rose-coloured hopes for the future faded in the cold light of disillusionment in the weeks that followed.

The students at the Conservatoire were certainly kinder to me but they never accepted me freely. I still felt a stranger among them, conscious of that fatal difference I could not transcend or explain. Louis remained a trusted friend, it is true, but the charming young officer became almost an enemy when I would not accept his far from strategic advances. And greatest disappointment of all, Mamma did not join me; at the last moment, Papa's jealous possessiveness kept her at home. It was a very poor consolation that my two girl friends came from England and took up their residence at Madame Aubert's, but their company made it easier for me to bear Madame's jealousy and Marguerite's studied detachment. We had fun and adventures together and the greatest fun for me was to open their very English eyes to the delights of life in a Continental city.

Towards the end of their stay, we plotted to go in secret to a great masked ball at the Opera House. Prizes were offered for performances during the evening and we entered ourselves under fictitious names as "dancers." We hired dominoes for the occasion—a pale green for Julia, who was pretty as an English rosebud, a blue for Phyllis, moody and plain, a violet one for me, and every night after midnight, on

the flat roof above my little room, we practised a fantastic cake-walk with many steps of our own invention. On the great night, we crept breathlessly through my window down into the unkempt garden, slipped cautiously into the street, put on our masks, pulled down the hoods of the dominoes, were cheered by the passers-by and reached the Opera House, promising each other on the way that nothing should separate us during the evening. When our fictitious names were called out, we were too excited to recognise them and did not stir until we heard a great shout, "*Les trois belles anglaises!*" and a tidal wave of young men swept down on us and bore us up on to the stage. The band struck up a few bars and with shaking legs, but fortunately in perfect rhythm, we broke into our dance. It was encored three times and at the end, in a state of collapse, we were almost lifted from the stage and presented with the prize, a terrible statue that we did not dare take home and eventually abandoned in a *fiacre*. After this triumph there was great competition among the young men to dance with us, and in spite of our resolution we became separated in the crowd. A tall German from the Embassy, who had often tried to speak to me in the street, waltzed me off with one word "*Enfin*" and at the end of the dance whisked me into a private box, ordered champagne, and then locked the door and taking me in his arms, proceeded to kiss me expertly on the mouth. My response must have been disappointing, for he released me abruptly, exclaiming: "But you are only a child!" Rather piqued, I answered with as much dignity as I could muster: "That is why I must go home. Please unlock the door," and after some protests he did so.

Like a bird from a cage, I flew down the corridor, looking everywhere for the others, who had completely vanished, longing to leave and very near to tears. Suddenly the young German reappeared and humbly offered to drive me home, promising to behave like a brother if he did so, and I thank-

fully consented. Never had I been so happy to be back in my own room. When I reached its haven, I sat on the bed and waited anxiously for the others to return. Phyllis came first, in a very bad mood. Exclaiming meaningly—but what was the meaning?—"No more foreigners for me!" she went off to her room, leaving me to await Julia until the small hours, when she came at last, exhausted and dishevelled but radiant—and as silent as Phyllis about her adventures, but I felt that her silence had a different meaning.

Soon after this eventful evening the girls went back to England. I could not bear my loneliness in the Aubert atmosphere without them, and with my family's permission moved to a small *pension*, where I could be completely independent and dedicate myself entirely to work and my career. It was the end of playtime and, in a sense, of my girlhood too.

The appointment as Court Singer, which had at first made me proud and elated, filled me as the days passed with a curious foreboding. It became stronger when a distinguished stranger, a great contrast to the other simple guests at the *pension*, suddenly appeared there regularly and at meal-times sat opposite me and catechised me about my family, my tastes and ambitions. My discomfort was not lessened when the mistress of the *pension* warned me to be careful of my answers, as she was sure he had been sent by someone in the highest circles, who must be particularly interested in me. One night I had a strange dream. I dreamt that I was crossing the Place de Bruxelles and suddenly noticed that crowds were lined up on each side. They told me that the King was driving to the Senate in full regalia and I must wait to see him pass. He came, and when he reached me he leaned out of the carriage and looked at me with admiration but with the eyes of a bird of prey. I woke up trembling, and awaited the first command to the Palace with apprehension. When at last it came, I spoke to Madame Vancranden about my feelings and she

said that she would be going with me and that another of the students, Jean, a Scottish girl with a beautiful soprano voice, could come too and sing a duet with me to end the programme. I was much relieved and, when the day came, dressed with excitement and a feeling of importance, though mourning more than ever my martyred fur coat and purple feather, that would have lent glamour to my modest wardrobe.

We had been summoned to the Country Palace at Laeken and one of the royal carriages was sent to fetch us. It had enormous springs which were so resilient that our ceremonious progress was somewhat marred by my falling on top of Madame Vancranden as we rounded a corner. As we approached the drawbridge to the Palace a sentry with a bayonet cried: "Who goes there?" and our footman, saluting, answered: "At the service of His Majesty the King." Without warning my dream came back to me and I turned so pale that Jean whispered: "Hold on, you can't faint before you've sung." With an effort I controlled my thoughts; the carriage drew up before the Palace and we entered.

We were shown into a small anteroom with beautiful pictures on its yellow brocaded walls. I remember particularly a Rubens portrait of a smiling woman with such serenity and wisdom in her smile that it gave me calm. There was white-and-gold furniture that concealed too many of the lovely bunches of roses on the Aubusson carpet—they were so life-like that I could almost have kneeled down to inhale their perfume. Madame Vancranden had become redder than any of the roses; Jean remained her calm Caledonian self. We heard a sound, and all turned. A tall man with a strange smile had come in and, as though in another dream, I recognised him as the elusive guest from the *pension*. He asked us to follow him, and led us up a magnificent staircase to the Music Room where the King awaited us, standing in a half-circle of men and one woman, whose name I never dis-

covered. Madame Vancranden presented Jean and myself. I was so fascinated by the sight of a table in a corner of the room covered with a cloth of exquisite Brussels lace falling to the ground and set with a gold *chocolatière*, golden cups and saucers and dishes of fantastic cakes, that for a moment I forgot to curtsy.

Chocolate was served and the King chose several of what he said were his favourite cakes and ordered them to be handed to me, looking at me with the exact expression I had seen in my dream. I asked that Madame should be served first and the expression changed to one of surprise, but my wish was granted. When the cakes reached me, I ate them with abandon and was grateful that there was an interval for stilted conversation before His Majesty asked Madame Vancranden to go to the piano and I had to sing. I gave first Gluck's "*Armez vous d'un noble courage*," and fortunately it was an aria in which I could lose myself completely. It won generous applause and I followed it with Duparc's lovely *Chanson Triste*. Then Jean and I sang the duet from Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, an unsuitable choice of Madame's—she said it showed the mystic side of my art, but it was hardly the atmosphere for mysticism. That was the end of the ordeal and I could have danced with joy. My forebodings had faded, but the King's lavish compliments and the pressure of his hand as we parted unfortunately revived them.

We drove home in silence. I could not talk freely in front of Jean and although I longed to ask Madame's advice and she was much kinder to me than she had been in the past, she did not encourage confidences. I tried to tell myself that my fears were groundless—hallucinations perhaps—but my instinct contradicted me. I decided I would write a long letter to Mamma, though I knew I would never post it, to try and get the tormenting premonition out of my mind: I wrote unposted letters through all our partings, when the longing to talk with her was too overpowering, and I knew that what

I had to say would cause her pain. The letter I actually sent described the Palace and its beauty but referred hardly at all to the King.

The next week passed uneventfully. I attended the Conservatoire as usual, trying to draw as little attention to myself as possible and to absorb myself entirely in study, but at moments I was haunted by the King's hawk-like eyes and a dread of what was to come.

One day, during the half-term holiday, when I returned to the *pension* from a walk, the proprietress told me with glistening eyes that a command had come for me to sing again at the Palace on the following day, this time in Brussels: I was to go alone and Madame Vancranden would join me there. I was terrified and wondered if I could disobey the summons. Madame Vancranden, I knew, was in the country and I could not get in touch with her and did not know what I should sing. But again I thought of Carmen's "*Arrive qui plante*" and of Miss Green and the "ancestors", and from somewhere courage came.

Next day I dressed breathlessly, chose my most impersonal songs and drove alone, in a cab this time, to the Palace. I was shown again into an anteroom. There was no sign of Madame: I hoped doubtfully that she was already with the King. Soon a young equerry appeared and I followed him upstairs. A door seemed to open without human touch, and the King was standing on the threshold. He took my hands, welcomed me, to my surprise, by my Christian name, and drew me into the room. It was a beautiful suite, but there was no piano, and we were alone. "Where is Madame Vancranden, Sire?" I asked. He smiled and said he hoped she would come later. "And the piano, Sire?" I asked as calmly as I could. He smiled again. "This is an afternoon for conversation, not for singing," he replied. "Let us sit down." He indicated a velvet-covered sofa and we sat, he too close to me. I tried to move away, but he stopped me with a gesture and took my

hand. "I want to talk to you about the career you have chosen," he began almost paternally. "You are an artist, but you do not belong to that world by birth or upbringing. You have a beautiful voice, temperament and great talent, but in spite of them I fear you will find the path too full of thorns."

For a moment I seemed to hear my godfather's voice. Were my fears a fantasy? Was the King really only interested in my welfare? But he continued with a subtle change of tone: "If you are to succeed, you will need someone to pave the way for you, to save you from difficulties and hardship, and give you all that your personality can command—in short, you will need a protector and, my dear child, I want you to know that I shall esteem it a great privilege to be allowed to be he." And before I could answer, he proceeded to paint a picture of the Arabian Nights life of luxury he could offer me—riches, jewels, wonderful clothes, leading rôles at the Opera, a house in the city, a villa in the South of France—all to be mine without a struggle.

When he had done, I wanted to burst into tears, yet felt an extraordinary calm. I answered without hesitation: "Sire, I am determined to fight and succeed by my own efforts and to suffer, if need be. I thank you for your offer, but am humiliated that you should think I would sacrifice my integrity and accept it."

He appeared angry and amazed. "Humiliated! You should be proud. You have made a naïve decision and must reconsider it."

"No, Sire, it is final," I answered and, rising, asked his permission to leave.

He was standing between me and the door and for what seemed hours did not move or speak, only looked with his bird-of-prey eyes into mine. Then, suddenly without warning, he drew me to him and kissed me full on the lips with a lasciviousness I had never met before. Terrified, I struggled wildly and managed to free myself. He moved aside, opened

the door and, bowing with what seemed sarcastic deference, said: "I hope this is only *au revoir*."

I could not answer but ran blindly from the room.

From the Palace I walked for hours in a waking nightmare through a changed world. I felt degraded and afraid. What had I done? What should I do now? I was still so young and inexperienced, in spite of the impression of poise and maturity that I seemed to give. I must have help. But to whom could I turn? There was no one. I longed desperately for my home, but knew if I went back now I would never be allowed to continue my career. Perhaps parents were right not to allow their children to have one.

At last, passing the Cathedral of Saint Guedule, I was attracted by its warm interior and myriads of flickering candles and went in. And suddenly I thought: "A priest could help me: he could give me the comfort and advice I so badly need."

I entered the confessional and, forgetting to speak of my venial sins, told quite simply all that had happened. There was a silence. Then came the priest's voice. It told me I must leave Brussels at once.

"At once!" I protested—"but I have not finished my studies."

"You must work elsewhere or let experience complete them," was the answer. "To stay here might be a disaster."

"But I have not enough money to travel—and I cannot ask for help from home."

Then came an offer to lend me the fare to wherever I decided to go, and a promise to take the ticket for me and to give any further help that was needed outside the confessional. I left the Cathedral with a deep feeling of gratitude and protection, but a strange sense of having sinned. I walked near the walls and shunned the park on the way back

to the *pension*, for I could not now enjoy all that I had so loved before.

When I got back to my room, I sat and thought over the priest's advice and knew I must follow it, though it would mean leaving the Conservatoire before I felt ready to embark on a career. To imagine that my parents would allow me to study elsewhere, if they knew what had happened, was hopeless: they would simply send for me home. "Experience must be my teacher," as the priest had said, and I tried to persuade myself that fate had staged all this to spur me on. But where could I go? Then I remembered an aunt of Mamma's in Paris. She was modern in her ideas and I thought would understand my dilemma. I would go and stay with her and try to get an engagement. I felt relieved at the decision and, before I went to bed, left a note at Madame Vancranden's, asking if I could talk to her privately as soon as possible, and then tried to sleep, but my mind was a broken mosaic of thoughts and I lay awake through the long hours, trying to re-form their pattern.

At her class the next morning, Madame gave me one of her X-ray looks and, when we were leaving, called my name. She said she could only spare me a few moments, so I asked if she would allow me to come to her house that evening, as I needed to consult her as the mother of daughters rather than as a teacher. She told me to come at six o'clock.

When I arrived a maid showed me into a little room, good for confidences. Madame entered and I tried to tell her without too many details what had happened at the Palace, the priest's advice and the decision I had taken, and asked her if she approved it. She looked shocked but was not, I felt, surprised. After considering for some time, she said: "This makes me extremely sad, but although I shall lose the pupil of whom I have expected most, you must leave Brussels as soon as possible. I am touched that you should refuse what

would seem to many a glorious future, but however golden such promises may appear, their outcome is a hazard that depends on fate." Then for the first and last time she kissed me. I felt relieved and strengthened, but sad too: in my heart I had hoped she would tell me to stay.

The next afternoon, there was the theory class with Madame Keupells and, as she had always been so patient with me, I stayed behind and told her I would be leaving the Conservatoire at once. I tried to avoid any explanation, but she insisted on learning the reason. When I told her, she looked at me curiously and said: "This is an opportunity that may come only once in a lifetime. Think over your decision, reconsider it. If you refuse now, you will probably regret it later." Fond as I had been of her I almost despised her for this advice and remembered that unlike Madame Vancranden she was only the mother of sons.

The practical difficulties of leaving so suddenly seemed endless, but I surmounted them one by one. I accepted my priest's kindly offer and allowed him to take the ticket for Paris. I gave notice at the *pension*, to the curiosity and annoyance of the proprietress. I visited the park for the last time as the shadows were falling and thanked it for having been such a beloved friend. I packed my music and my small trunk and decided to leave out my best costume of pale blue cloth for the journey, to make an impression when I arrived in Paris. Finally, at the last moment, I wrote to Mamma telling her I was leaving and would explain the reason later, and to my aunt, asking if I might stay with her for a short while, not giving her the time to answer or refuse.

To this day I remember my loneliness as I left Brussels in the late evening with no one to embrace or be embraced by. I felt like a rather ridiculous ghost in the pale blue costume, so unsuitable for that hour and any journey. My priest had taken, of course, a third-class ticket and the compartment was filled with peasants to whom I was a great source of

interest. They looked like old Dutch paintings and watched me discreetly from under their lashes with the natural breeding that often comes from the soil. Their bags were full of food, which they shared with me and each other, and the oldest of them poured out a huge bottle of beer that, carefully wrapped in a gingham cloth, had been resting on his wife's stomach, and suggested that in a community spirit we all drank from the same glass. I did not feel equal to this, so, to avoid hurting his kindly feelings, hastily explained that I came out in a rash on my face and neck if I touched a drop of beer. I felt quite at home with these gentle souls, and even found myself putting on a Flemish accent when I talked with them. They asked me numberless interested, not curious, questions about myself, and were horrified to hear I was going alone to Paris, the wicked city that, they warned me, had been the destruction of so many young girls. I reassured them by saying I was going to my aunt's and hoped to be quite safe. The odour of the food mixed with the smell of the compartment, which had just been newly varnished, was almost overpowering. There were no cushions on the seats, I could not sleep, and the long hours to Paris seemed endless. At last the dawn came in all its grandeur. We were passing through the outskirts of Paris clothed in a mystery and beauty it is hard to explain. From the train window I could see into some of the humble apartments: children were sitting round the tables, their napkins tied almost suffocatingly round their necks, so that they should not stain their black cotton smocks, as they watched their mothers cut slices of bread from enormous loaves. I longed for my own mother, and loneliness and fear of the future overcame me. But when the huge engine, like a giant Falstaff puffing madly, steamed into the Gare du Nord, I felt suddenly like a pioneer ready to sail uncharted seas. This was surely the beginning of a great adventure: I would face it bravely. I rose to do so—or rather, I tried to rise—horror of horrors! I was glued to the freshly

varnished seat! I pulled and wrenched and wrenched and pulled and got free only by leaving a piece of my treasured cloth skirt stuck to the treacly wood. Fortunately I had pulled up my coat when trying to sleep, so it could cover the rent that gaped in a most unfortunate place. Recovering from this disaster as best I could, with my pioneer spirit considerably damped, I left the station, hailed a taxi and gave my aunt's address, hoping I would have enough money to pay the fare.

When I reached her impressive home, the concierge examined me with a policewoman's expression. These French concierges are a race apart, one that I am afraid will never be abolished. They form a complete detective system in league with the police and are capable of lying away one's reputation. If one does not close one's eyes to their forays on one's groceries, wine, coal and wood, letters mysteriously fail to reach one and the tradespeople are not allowed to call, carpets are shaken on to one's balcony and one's roses and geraniums become grey with the dust of their rage and vengeance. In fact, they are horrible human beings, who lend an unnecessary terror to life in France.

I climbed the fan-shaped staircase with its banister of wrought iron, shaped like tortured hands crushing grapes, which led to my aunt's apartment, and wondered who all the people had been who had lived in this house, so quiet and beautifully aloof. I longed for a home of my own where I could enjoy at leisure everything from the texture of the fine linen tablecloths to the simple lines of the silver spoons, but how could such things have importance, I asked myself, when the real struggle of my life was about to begin?

My heart was thumping violently as I rang the bell with its long red cord, and I wished I could run back to my primitive friends in the train. A maid with suspicious, intelligent eyes appeared and questioned me with her eyebrows. I said that I was Madame's niece and had not had time to send a tele-

gram to announce my arrival. She answered that Madame was still asleep and showed me into a sitting-room like a miniature museum where the old furniture was covered, as is the French habit, with white shrouds. I felt I was in a cemetery and they were tombstones, staring at me, and I wished I were really dead.

I grew more and more depressed and seemed to have sat there for a week, when the door suddenly opened and Aunt Gabrielle came in. She was tall with a large Bourbon nose and eyes with hardly any lashes that were beautiful nevertheless, for it is the expression that makes beauty. She came towards me with a delightful smile, saying: "I am overjoyed to see you, but why have you come? Trust me; I promise I will repeat nothing to your family unless you wish." I said it was impossible to talk so early in the morning and asked if my luggage could be brought up, adding hastily that I would not be staying long, as I had to start earning my living. She looked aghast and said: "You are not taking this career idea seriously?" "Of course I am," I answered, and to relieve the tension added: "My nurse used to say everything must be taken seriously, from brushing one's teeth in the morning to brushing them again at night." She laughed at this and said I reminded her of my brother Ben and took me to my room. A mysterious little corridor led from it to her bathroom, which she told me I could share with her, and I knew this was a great honour. The bath, and its grandchild the bidet, had taps of golden bronze swans' heads; there were paintings of famous nudes on the walls, that made one long to recapture the lines of the women who had ruled the rulers of France; and the air was filled with a chorus of perfumes. But I was too nervous to enjoy my bath and looked at myself in the mirror as a stranger in those unfamiliar surroundings.

Aunt Gabrielle had told me to come to her room for coffee. It was a beautiful room, but not friendly. The French have a snobbishness about "period" in their furnishings that

avoids the cosiness bred of mistakes. We drank coffee out of the loveliest cups I had ever seen, the sun filtered through the windows, and outside passing cars sounded their horns like angry birds of prey. Aunt Gabrielle said she liked the colour of my costume but asked why I kept on the coat, when it was such a warm spring day. I told her the sad story of the varnished seat and she laughed so wholeheartedly that I felt more at ease, and when she questioned me again I was able to talk quite freely. I told her of the difficulties I had had in leaving home, of Francisco and the family's desire that I should marry him, but said that I did not love him and knew that love would never come later, as my father had declared it would. With me it comes at once or never, and the thought of a marriage based only on friendship and convenience appalled me. My aunt looked grave and sympathetic, for she herself had made a *mariage de convenance* in the French way and had remained within it for the sake of her daughter: France is perhaps the most intelligently conventional country in the world, yet it is looked upon as the most immoral. Then I described my life in Brussels and my success at the Conservatoire, touching as lightly as possible upon the episode with the King and stressing my determination to earn money for the family, now that Papa had become still more neurasthenic and had had to give up his work. Aunt Gabrielle looked bewildered and asked what I meant to do? I explained that I had the address of a theatre agency and must go there at once, so as to try and get an engagement as a singer. I could see this really shocked her, for she and her husband belonged to the old French nobility, who regarded all artists as *déclassés*, but she only said that I could not go out in Paris alone and she would send her personal maid with me. I thanked her gratefully, and she kissed me and told me I must regard this as my home for the time being. I could easily have burst into tears, so thanked her again and ran to

my room. When I saw my lovely bed, I longed to lie down and pull the curtains round me and hide from life. How would I have the courage to go to that office and ask for work? My parents' and godfather's prophecies and the King's words surged through my mind. I could never face it. Yet a still, small voice, faint as a perfumed breeze, whispered of hope and I knew in my heart that I would go.

The agency was in the Rue Vivienne, in the busiest part of Paris. Aunt Gabrielle insisted that the maid and I should go in the car, but I knew instinctively that one must not drive up to the door in it, so I told the chauffeur to stop in a neighbouring street and asked the maid to wait there; it would be fatal to be labelled a "lady." I got out and the unfortunate gendarme, who was trying to direct the traffic with what looked like a rolling-pin, stared at me in amazement. Was it the pale blue costume or had he seen the hole in the skirt?

The office was on the fourth floor of a gloomy building. There was no lift and the climb seemed endless. Arriving breathless at last, I passed through an enormous swing-door into a large room: it was incredibly drab and shabby and the people in it were more so. They all turned and gaped at me and I suddenly felt I was going to faint. I asked if I could see the Director and was told there were three, which did I wish to see? I said: "The one who will be most interested in seeing me: I am a singer."

I waited and was aware of doors being opened mysteriously and of being peered at from behind. I turned and saw an attractive, yet cunning, face with a black beard, very small but most brilliant eyes and virginal white teeth, that surely had never been molested by any dentist. Their owner smiled with admiration and curiosity as he came towards me. He asked my name and said I was a contralto of course? I replied that I was both contralto and mezzo-soprano. Then he asked

in which opera houses I had sung. My heart sank and strange noises like departing steamers buzzed in my ears. I thought "I must lie," so took the plunge and mentioned Covent Garden as one. Before he could ask further questions, more doors opened and there seemed to be Directors in every corner watching me. It was probably the quality of my voice, so un-French and deep, that had attracted them. I was asked if I had brought my music. I had not. They said it might be possible to find something in their collection. Had I an accompanist? Again I said I had not and would rather sing another day, as I was extremely tired, having travelled all night. The man with the beard, who I learned later was half-Arab and whose name was Traverso, replied that he could tell from my speaking voice that I had unusual quality and he wanted to hear me at once. He would telephone for an accompanist, if I would sit down and wait. There was something about him that I liked; I could see he admired me and it gave me confidence. He disappeared in his swallow-tailed coat, looking like a lonely sparrow I had seen one day in a side-street in Brussels with such personality that I have never forgotten it; he might have been its brother.

I do not know how long I sat and waited, but I was so interested by all I saw that I forgot my fears. And my heart was almost broken by all I saw. The artists who filed into the office were so pathetic. Their clothes were shabby, they cringed with fear or were over-amiable, excusing themselves when they sat down or stood up, and I wondered whether I would ever have to imitate them? I knew that I never could. They remained pathetic because they did not know that dignity—with nothing else—can carry one to the ends of the earth.

The accompanist arrived at last. She looked like some animal and only the intelligence of her eyes redeemed her as a human being. Her teeth had quarrelled and were so separated that she lisped, and private fountains, of which she did

not seem at all conscious, shot out of her mouth. She looked at me with interest through a tortoise-shell lorgnette hanging on a silver chain, so heavy it could easily have tied a liner to the dock.

I knew only two operatic arias by heart, having been fed on the old classics—Handel, Bach, Gluck, Durante. I realise now all that those great masters inspired in me, and if any young singers read this, the finest advice I can give them is: Begin, continue and end your career by singing each day at least one of their marvellous arias.

For my ordeal I chose the mother's aria from *The Prophet*, as I had for the Conservatoire examination. The accompanist went to the piano and started the introduction. She played shockingly and had no idea of rhythm or that a singer has to take breaths; I was reminded of somebody running for a bus, determined to get there even if she dropped dead on the way. I would have preferred to sing unaccompanied. In America I found many great accompanists, little boys from hick towns who had never played for great artists, but whose reverence for music was so profound that their touch and understanding were an inspiration to me. In France accompanists look on their playing as a business; in America it is an art.

I fixed my eyes on a spot on the wall and thought of the most beautiful things I could visualise—the butterfly in the china cup from which I had drunk my coffee, a certain statue of Our Lady that I adored, and my mother's face. The interest in the eyes of the three Directors, who looked more like detectives than men connected with the arts, challenged me, and I gave rein to my voice and spirit without fear. I ended the aria on the deepest note in my range with such intensity that doors opened, typewriters stopped clicking and the accompanist was so subdued that the ostrich feather, which had stood up in her hat, almost kneeled down.

The Arab director, Monsieur Traverso, flew toward me

and he and the others bombarded me with excited questions. From what country was I? Who had been my teacher? What did I want to do?

I answered: "Messieurs, I want a season at an Opera House." And on the spot they offered me an engagement in Rouen, where Monsieur Traverso himself was Director of the Opera Company. Could it be true? My heart pounded so madly that my pearl necklace jumped up and down like a skipping-rope round my throat. They produced a contract, which I signed without even reading it, and was in such a daze I did not realise that if I did not keep to what I had signed, I could be sued for a large sum. They asked where I had left my costumes and I had to lie again and answered I had always been dressed by the Opera House. Monsieur Traverso said they had a collection I could choose from.

I left the office bathed in sweat and utterly exhausted. Monsieur Traverso accompanied me downstairs and would have come further, but there I left him. I did not want him to see the limousine with its coat of arms and the maid, who had by this time fallen asleep in the car.

The chauffeur drove home like a thunderbolt, for I had forgotten the all-important lunch-hour, and in what seemed like two minutes I was back in that other world of elegance and ease. My aunt was sitting calmly at table, very interested in her newspaper. She looked up with a prepared expression, but tactfully asked no questions. The delicious food, served on exquisite old silver dishes, brought me back to earth and I helped myself copiously. Nowhere in the world has food such power to unloose the saliva of one's mouth and mind as in France. One's enemies can become one's best friends over a well-prepared entrée and the wines so carefully chosen to go with the meal. After I had finished eating, Aunt Gabrielle turned to me and asked: "Well, was the water cold and how did you enjoy your first plunge into so deep a sea?"

I told her all that had happened and how excited I was, and frightened too, at what I had undertaken.

She said: "The unknown is always frightening. You have taken a rash step without your family's permission, but I feel your guardian angel will protect you."

She asked to see my contract: I had forgotten to bring it with me, but declared it was unimportant, as I was a fatalist.

"You must be a realist, if you are to earn your living," she said.

"I will try," I promised, "but in England everyone is innocent until they are proved guilty, and I would rather be cheated a thousand times than suspect the wrong person once."

"Try and keep your ideals," she smiled. And I can truly say that through the years, in the face of great odds, I have tried.

Next morning my uncle returned from his shoot at the family's château with its turrets and instruments of torture in the cellars and wide moat with water-lilies and weird grasses floating on the stagnant water. He was a stern soldier without much brain, strange and aloof. His presence caused a strained atmosphere at *déjeuner*, and I was in terror that Aunt Gabrielle would explain the reason for my visit, but she did not say a word. He looked at me only when passing the salt or pepper, telling me it was bad for young girls. In return I told him of my father, who drank soup with such potent chili in it that his valet had to stand behind his chair and mop his brow with a silk handkerchief, very dexterously so that it did not fall into the soup. My uncle did not smile, only raised his eyebrows which were thick and dishevelled and reminded me of a thatched cottage I had stayed in as a little girl.

After lunch I went to my room to think over the next step I must take—the costumes. Clothes have the value of friends who can help one over life's difficult moments, and for my début I knew they would be all-important. My figure was—let us say—opulent for my years, but I realised it could be

made an asset by grace of movement, a sense of gesture and, above all, the right costumes.

A gentle tap at the door and my aunt's silver voice asked if she could come in. I rose with a sense of guilt at lying down so early in the afternoon. She asked why I was so pale and said I must rest. I told her I had to go back to the agency and said I would rather take a bus this time, and go without the maid, as she embarrassed me. She did not seem pleased at this sudden independence but only sighed, kissed me on the forehead, saying: "Very well, dress as sombrely as you can and if anybody speaks to you, ignore it," and left me. I dressed abominably and did not care: the contract was signed, so what did it matter?

At first I was nervous, walking alone, but the beauty of Paris soon diverted me. In the park I wanted to put my arms round the trees with their wonderful candlesticks of chestnut-flowers, and play with the lovely children with their little high-pitched voices conversing with their friends like grown-up people and shaking hands gravely when they met and left each other. In the streets I admired the working women with their strong feet, that walk for miles in felt slippers. I watched the baker's boy on his shaky bicycle with an enormous bell, carrying on his back a dozen long loaves of bread like rods of gold, filtering his way in the narrow spaces like an eel, never getting hurt and never dropping one of the loaves. I passed bakers' shops where one could smell miles of delicious hot almond paste and rosewater intermingled, and be introduced to the wonderful puffed pastry called frangipane. I heard snatches of conversation between the worker and his master, always mingled with philosophy. Everywhere people were laughing, discussing, grumbling—all part of the day's life. I longed to linger and savour it all, but my costumes called.

Seeing a bus pass, I tried to jump on, but an old lady behind pulled me from the step and asked in a shrill voice:

"Where is your number?" Was she referring to my moral character? At least twelve other people were looking daggers at me, so I smiled as amiably as I could and asked to be forgiven, as it was the first time I had taken a bus. They thought I was giving myself airs and all piled in until the bus was full, so I walked along the boulevard to try and get another. I saw a grey-bearded man coming towards me, with an enormous watch-chain dangling on his stomach. He looked a respectable, staid old man, and I thought it would be quite safe to speak to him. I did not know then that Frenchmen love at any and every age. They are in love with Woman and make each one feel that she is the only one. It is so gallant and right and costs so little in the end; women need the protection and encouragement of men's desires. There is nothing so baffling as the expression of a disinterested man, and the distance and inhibitions in the eyes of most Englishmen and Americans, when they look at a woman, can freeze the blood.

I stopped the old man and said: "*Pardon, monsieur*, can you tell me where to find the bus for Montmartre?"

He took off his felt hat, swept it almost to the ground and said he would accompany me to the place where they stopped. He began to walk in a sauntering way as if we were taking a promenade. I felt quite at ease as he was so unattractive, but we seemed to be walking a long time and I suddenly suspected he was playing the same trick as the taxi-drivers who, when you are a foreigner, drive round and round when the place you want is just next door. I told him I must hurry or I would be late, but he laughed and suggested that we should sit outside a café and taste all that Paris and the spring had to offer. I suddenly remembered Aunt Gabrielle's warning and, seeing what I thought might be my bus, made a dash, jumped on and left the old gentleman agape on the pavement. He looked so foolish that I burst into laughter and the whole bus laughed with me.

In the Rue Vivienne little pushcarts were piled with lilies-of-the-valley and violets. Fat old women were wiping their apples to make them shine, and offering them with pride, crying: "*Goutez la pomme, madame, la bonne pomme de Renette.*" I had no time to buy any, but I kept the picture in my heart.

This time I climbed the agency's flights of creaky stairs without taking a breath. In the office the secretary with a large bosom, swollen from glandular trouble and probably an enormous appetite, gave me a watery smile without recognition. She asked my name again and if I had an appointment with the Director? I said: "No, but I am sure he will see me." She detached herself from her chair with a deep sigh and waddled to the double doors of the other room.

In half a moment my Arab friend was through them and came to me, exclaiming with his strange, oriental smile: "Here is our great singer!"

I was flattered and told him happily I had come to discuss my costumes with him. He raised his expressive eyebrows so high that I thought they would never come down again and said: "Alas, it is my wife and not I who looks after the wardrobe. I will take you to meet her and I am sure she will arrange something interesting."

My heart sank. We walked what seemed miles and climbed several flights of stairs, then he knocked at a door and we went into a large room where hundreds of costumes were hanging covered with sheets and numbered. The tallest, thinnest, ugliest Frenchwoman I have ever seen was sitting there. She had two long front teeth that seemed to be outside her mouth, shrewd little eyes and long fair hairs on her upper lip, which fascinated me. When I explained what I wanted, she looked me up and down and said that we must first see what fitted me, which I thought extremely tactless. The horrors she then showed me could only be compared to the table-covers used by the poorest magicians—made of

dark red plush like stale blood, with heavy tassels hanging in peculiar places. I was horrified and said I would rather not sing at all than wear such atrocities. She replied icily that this was the best she could do, so I demanded to talk to her husband, who had disappeared. When he came, I told him I would rather break my contract than be made to look ridiculous; he must take me to the best costumer in Paris and if necessary I would pay for the costumes myself. He looked amazed but enchanted. We descended the rickety stairs after a stiff goodbye to Madame, who was replacing the atrocities in their shrouds with a steely glint in her eye.

Once in the street, I felt happy, reckless and quite at ease with Monsieur Traverso. We walked with our steps in perfect unison, which I always feel is a good sign, and he told me how much he was looking forward to directing me and that I would be the Delilah of his dreams. Soon we reached a large shop, displaying magnificent costumes, with the name Edward Souplet above the double windows, and entered.

Monsieur Souplet himself advanced towards us. He had a bushy mayonnaise-coloured wig that did not fit his head, and large watery blue eyes, a huge mouth, perfectly square yellow teeth, and the body of a boy of fourteen. His wife followed him, the biggest woman I have ever seen, with no attempt at a figure and tiny black eyes, shrewd and intelligent like a guinea-pig's. Monsieur Traverso introduced me with a flourish and said I had one of the voices of the world and he was sure I would make history in the operatic field. I wondered why then he had not offered to pay for my costumes.

The Souplets proceeded to show me the most amazing materials and jewellery so beautiful that it was hard to believe it was not real. Everything, they said, would be made of Lyons velvet and lined with the purest silk. The price? The costumes for four operas, a mere six thousand francs. I nearly collapsed, but by this time I was dizzy with excitement and hardly *compos mentis*. Monsieur Souplet asked

what guarantees I could give and I heard myself saying: "Only my reputation. Isn't that enough?" And when he asked how the payments would be made, I took a deep breath and answered firmly: "By the month."

Bills and i.o.u.'s appeared like magic. They seemed to cover the entire carpet and I signed them madly. They commented on the originality of my signature and said it was a very good sign and would I spell the name, please.

We left the elegant shop at last and I walked in complete silence. Sanity had returned and I had an agonised feeling of having undertaken something I could not possibly fulfil. Having at home been taught principles of strict honesty in money matters, the thought of that huge debt was already a thorn in my flesh and it remained so for years.

Monsieur Traverso took my hand and said we should drink a little porto to the success of the bills. I said it should be a barrel. He laughed so loudly that people turned round and stared. I asked if he really thought I would be able to make so much money in my life, and he said it was good I was so naïve about my talent and that if I worked hard this Season I would see what it would bring.

That night I wrote to my parents and told them of the Rouen engagement. I awaited their answer with trepidation. At last it came. Papa wrote: "Prove that you are sufficiently talented, that you are really worthy of a great art; do not make us ashamed of you, and we will forgive you. Until then, we wait."

It was a challenge and I accepted it, half confident, half afraid.



Rouen—Algiers



WHILE I was still at Aunt Gabrielle's, before the rehearsals for Rouen started, I had a happy surprise. I learned that the Peruvian Government had granted me a sum of money for the continuation of my musical studies. This was just what I longed for, and I arranged at once to take lessons with a great teacher and coach, Monsieur Tequi. He was rather a rough diamond and at first seemed to hate me, for he thought I jumped at things too quickly instead of waiting for the explanations that delighted his ego. But I worked my hardest, and in the end we became friends.

Rehearsals, when they began, were a sheer delight. Monsieur Traverso was a wonderful director and influenced me with infinite tact. He rarely said: "Don't do this or that," and never tried to interfere with anything spontaneous, only to bring out and mould what was within. He worked with me individually: I would not meet the Company until we were all at Rouen. We designed my costumes together and they were beautiful and I tried to forget the bills.

The time flew until the day came to leave for Rouen. Aunt Gabrielle generously insisted that I should take her maid with me for the first weeks, and that made me feel less alone. I found much to enchant me in the old town with its lovely cathedral, its museum—and its *canard à la presse*. I knew nowhere to stay, but discovered a charming little

fourteenth-century hotel, with plumbing of apparently the same period. The prices were too high, but the proprietress showed me a huge stable with rooms over it, used for the maids, and asked tentatively if they would be good enough for me. I answered that since Christ had been born in a stable, I should feel blessed to live over one. This seemed to please her and she offered to take furniture from the hotel and put it into two of the rooms. She kept her word and in a few days I had turned them into a home with a real atmosphere of its own.

The day I was to be introduced to the Company I was very nervous and could eat no breakfast or lunch. I had never met any artists and did not know what to expect. I went down to the Théâtre des Beaux Arts and was introduced to them all. They looked at me curiously, and I felt that awful "difference" again.

The first opera was to be *Samson and Delilah*. The tenor was a wonderful singer named Danjelli. He was of the people and taught me to eat garlic which, he swore, was with red wine the secret of the richness of the great voices of the world. I adored it and still do: to me it is the intellect of cooking, but it has one unfortunate quality in the mouth of tenors. When we had sung together for two or three minutes, I became deathly pale: the garlic in his breath had taken all the make-up from my face.

The only cultured man in the company was the baritone, Figarella. He realised that we were of the same world and that I did not really like the *risqué* jokes that were tossed about by the others, though I laughed as loudly as any of them, to try and appear at ease.

Rehearsals went fairly well. Only the final one was with the orchestra; for the others we had just a tiny piano with some of the keys missing. Everything was done as cheaply as possible, and when the dress rehearsal came my wonderful costumes aroused great jealousy. I had not felt too popular

already and had overheard many uncharitable remarks made about me, such as "She's a cathedral on wheels"—which did not increase my confidence. As the first night approached, I fell into a nervous agony, and I heard with mixed feelings that my parents and Francisco were coming from England for my début. They stayed at my hotel and, though in some ways it was a happy reunion, it added to my torment.

The night before the great night, I could not sleep. I went through all my rôle and the *répliques* of the other singers and tossed and turned in a nightmare world: only the maid's breathing and the neighing of the horses in the stable below assured me that real life was still going on.

When I reached the theatre next evening, all was excitement; there was electricity in the air. I dressed as quickly as I could and stood breathlessly in the wings. The wives of the male singers were there, ready with glasses of wine and large handkerchiefs with which to mop their husbands' brows when they came off the stage. The ballet dancers in a world of their own were practising their *entrechats* in a far corner. I heard the audience talking and coughing and settling into their seats. Some of the artists peeped through the hole in the curtain and whispered: "The house will be full." My heart pounded with excitement and fear. The orchestra began to tune up. Then came the lovely overture. I longed to rush on to the stage at once, but felt overpowered by the weight of my costume, the barbaric jewels and my heavy sandals. I was also wearing an unfortunate red wig, that felt and looked like a fox that had jumped on to my head in the throes of the chase.

At last I heard the refrain that heralds the approach of Delilah. My moment had come. With heart beating wildly and pulses throbbing, I made my entry down the steps of an incredible rockery and advanced towards Samson, singing my opening phrase, "*Je viens célébrer la victoire de celui qui règne dans mon cœur.*" All sense of weight had left me; my

costume might have been made of gossamer, the sandals winged by Mercury. My voice soared and when I began the rhythmic movement that accompanies the aria, "*Printemps qui commence*," I knew that the audience had accepted me. From that moment I could do no wrong in their eyes, though the critics next day did not all share their opinion. At the end of the performance, a crowd of the Opera's *abonnés* came round to my dressing-room, showered me with compliments, and asked where one so young had gained so much experience and other awkward questions, which I evaded as tactfully as I could. My parents stood with Francisco in the background, but at last we were alone. Mamma took me in her arms and said: "Darling, we did not recognise you as our child, you were like a stranger."

"Dearest," I answered, "I was Delilah, but now I am your child again."

Papa said: "I am proud of you, though I should not be, and I am sure that our ancestors are proud too." He still thought only of the ancestors, who had given me nothing but my dual nature and expensive tastes.

Then they left me with Francisco. I turned to him and said: "You see, I am in earnest—I have started my career. What will your family say?"

He answered without hesitation: "They will never accept it."

I knew then that there could be nothing further between us and felt only a sense of relief.

Next day the Arab warmth and enthusiasm of Monsieur Traverso knew no bounds. He prophesied amazing things for my future and promised to work even harder with me than before. My next rôle, he told me, would be the Mother in *Louise*, a middle-aged working-class woman, a labourer's wife. Would I be able to create such a character, he asked, after the exotic splendours of Delilah?

"I will try; it will prove whether I am an artist or not," I replied.

"Yesterday was proof enough," he answered.

The help he gave me was incalculable. I felt at one with him and could read in his eyes all I needed to know, though the practical difficulties in rehearsal—the timing of the "business," ironing, cooking and a heavy peasant dance with the orchestration that was in such contrast to the classic "line" of *Delilah*—almost reduced me to tears. The kitchen, in which I played much of my scene, was so far offstage that I could hardly hear the orchestra at all and, most frustrating of all, I could not use *bel canto* singing but had almost to shout the phrases in the tones of an angry working-class woman. Happily, I found I could become as plebeian as the part demanded, and on the opening night the audience could hardly believe I was the *Delilah* they had seen before. And some of the Company, who had previously ignored me, probably thinking, because of my reserve, that I gave myself airs, now became on positively back-slapping terms.

These first successes should have filled me with triumphant happiness, but instead they were followed by moods of nervous exhaustion and fears that I would never attain the ideal I was striving for, or even be able to repeat the things that had seemed good. Creative art is a hard task-master. One is never free of its demands and always its slave.

By the end of the four months' season I had acquired a repertoire of six rôles and had been engaged to sing with a new opera company in Algiers. It seemed terrifyingly far to go, but the thought of the sunshine and all that Monsieur Traverso had told me of his country cheered me. He said he wished he could keep me with him for a few years, as he expected great things from my career, but he promised to write to the excellent conductor of the new Company about

me. He asked me to keep in touch with him, but not to write to him at home, as he might not receive the letters. His wife was inordinately jealous and had hated me from the first moment we met in the costume Chamber of Horrors.

I gathered information from the other artists, who had already worked for my new directors—Monsieur and Madame Poncet—and learned that they were the exact opposite of Monsieur Traverso, both ex-singers, she very jealous of youth and talent. I was told, however, they had engaged a wonderful company and this encouraged me. Everyone gave me different advice and showed great friendliness and anxiety for my future—I seemed to have penetrated the defences that had at first been put up against me. The tenor's wife warned me to take my medicine chest, as Algiers was dangerously unhealthy and recommended a *pension de famille*, kept by people she knew, where I would be safe from germs and the natives. I longed to go to a good hotel, but could not consider it; the monthly account for my costumes, which came in as regularly as the tide, was a perpetual drain on my purse. The goodbyes, when they came, were quite affecting. I felt I was leaving a big family and once again had to face the world alone.

I found Marseilles sordid but thrilling and never dreamed I would return one day to sing there. On the ship I had the disastrous idea of choosing *bouillabaisse* for lunch and was so desperately ill that I wanted to throw myself overboard. The stewardess, having an analytical mind, tried to help me by recalling every fish that had been thrown into that lurid dish and might have caused the disaster. Could it have been the eels, the snails or perhaps the *loup de mer*? The horror of these names made me render unto Neptune the things that were Neptune's—and I felt slightly better.

Next morning when we landed I was well enough to be interested in the different types who came on board—the Arab porters and the Algerians, warm and kindly in appear-

ance, speaking perfect French with a strange intonation. The Director and his wife came to my cabin to welcome me; they were suspicious and reserved; my heart sank but I showed nothing. They gave me immediately a schedule of the work I was to begin next day. I longed to remain in the ship and sail back to my beloved France that had become home to me.

There was excitement, however, in seeing the new land I had come to. This was a different France. Many of the buildings were completely Mauresque in architecture, their dazzlingly white walls covered in purple bougainvillea. Handsome Arabs in their white burnouses moved silently through the crowds, and women passed by, their beauty impenetrable behind mysterious yashmaks, carrying on their heads heavy baskets of fruit and laundry, as they walked with calm indolence. I remember most distinctly a Square I drove through, where Arabs, their heads on their knees, were taking their siesta in the shade of huge date trees. Thousands and thousands of birds congregated in those trees, chirping in conversation so loud that guns had to be fired to silence them. It was frightening to a stranger. I jumped and crouched in my rickety carriage at the sudden tumult. The coachman turned, smiled and said: "Have no fear, *mademoiselle*; it is only the rendezvous of the birds."

The *pension* was on the outskirts of the town and looked like a French villa in Malmaison. It was made of wood with a charming garden back and front. The proprietress, Madame Bernac, a smiling woman with white hair, welcomed me most cordially. Behind her in the dark hall, trying to observe me without being seen themselves, were a tremulous young man with a shawl round his shoulders and a beautiful woman like the Mona Lisa, who proved to be Madame Bernac's son and the maid.

My room was vast with a beautiful, clean smell, but furnished with dreadful taste and little personality. The view

over the town was all-embracing; little aigrettes of smoke rose from the Arab houses, and distant sounds of birds and dogs mingled with childish Arab laughter like cymbals on one note. The Mona Lisa maid entered to ask if I needed help in unpacking. There was nothing of the servant about her: I noticed the beauty of her hands as she opened my trunks and was embarrassed that she should lift the heavy straps. She stroked my clothes as if they reminded her of things she had possessed in the past. She said: "Mademoiselle has such beautiful things, and I am going to look after them for her, to be near her." I was grateful but wary. After she had left I crept under the heavy velvet bed-cover and began to weep. The thought of meeting the new Company and adapting myself again to new personalities was frightening. The heat too was overpowering.

I must have fallen asleep and was roused by an ominously muffled gong sounding like a knell. The piquant odour of a strange-smelling meat nauseated me as I went down the stairs to a large, cool dining-room with an enormous round table covered with unnecessary china and what looked like surgical instruments dangling from two fearsome cruets. At each place was one solitary knife, fork and spoon and a tiny jug of hot water with a napkin through the handle so that the implements could be washed between the courses. The son had discarded his shawl and proved intensely neurotic, intelligent and argumentative. Madame Bernac worshipped him as only the Latin mother can, and ruined him in the process. The animal I had smelt on the stairs approached in the shape of large steaks of questionable colour. I asked suspiciously what it was and was told joyfully: "Horse meat, surely, the only cure for anaemia, from which all in this country suffer." I too was inclined to be a sufferer, so, hoping this might be the answer, I made a valiant effort and consumed half my steak.

The next morning was so hot that I was dazed. I could not

possibly walk to the Opera House and took a carriage to within a discreet distance. The Directors were sitting on the stage in large armchairs and introduced me to the Company. The opera was again *Samson*, for which I was thankful, as I felt confident and experienced in my rôle. The conductor, a Belgian fat and tall, with a mane like a young lion, tender blue eyes and a generous mouth, gave me a civilised smile, unlike the others, who looked at me sideways like birds. The baritone, who came from the Opéra Comique in Paris, was an amazing artist, tall and dark with gypsy eyes and a wonderful "line" in gesture and movement. His name was Brizet and I learned later he was the son of a fisherman. The tenor was much inferior, a small personality with a tight voice. The opening was to be a gala night, I was told, attended by the Governor and important representatives of Society and the Army and Navy. We rehearsed much more than in Rouen, to achieve a balanced production, the baritone and I being actors by nature and the others good singers but inhibited actors.

On the first night I arrived in my dressing-room to find the *pension* Mona Lisa already there. She had hung up all my costumes and put a pot of jasmine on my dressing-table; a personal maid could not have been more solicitous. Her beautiful hands hooked my intricate costumes as if by magic and soothed my jangled nerves. The Directors came, together as always like Siamese twins, to wish me well but with their usual coldness. The conductor and the baritone gave me real courage and said the rehearsals had shown I had nothing to fear. It was a charming little theatre—red and white and gold as all theatres should be—and harmonised well with the costumes of the many important Arabs and the uniforms of the naval and military officers.

As I made my entrance, down the rocky steps once more, the atmosphere was very different from Rouen, and I too became different: I felt my part more intensely. And to act

with Brizet was an experience. When I sang my duet with him he gave so much that I was lost in happiness and exaltation. That night for the first time I felt full faith in myself and confidence in my future—and believed that the prophecies I had until then discounted as kindness towards a beginner might really come to pass.

The Siamese twins actually congratulated me at the end of the performance and announced that the Governor had expressed a wish to drive me home in his carriage. This too, like the theatre, was white, upholstered in red, and was driven by two beautiful white horses with red lacquer-lined nostrils. I felt it was all part of the performance and I was Delilah still. The people in the cafés stood up as we passed, cheered the Governor and looked curiously at me.

At the *pension* a charming little supper had been set out by Madame and her son, but I was too exhausted to enjoy it and was as usual overcome by the nervous depression that follows creation.

Next morning the maid entered with a large bunch of Parma violets with a note attached. They were from Brizet. He wrote how happy he had been in our singing, thanked me for all the beauty I had given, and said his only regret was that he had not driven me home himself. As there was no rehearsal that day, he asked if I would meet him for *déjeuner*, or perhaps an *apéritif* at six-thirty. I did not want my name coupled with his, but he attracted me and I was very lonely, so I accepted for the evening and was quite excited at the idea of meeting him as an individual rather than an artist.

I went out without saying when I would return. There was something sad about the *pension* and I wondered if I could find an apartment near the old port, which was beautiful and romantic. I would talk to him about it. He was waiting for me outside the *pension*, and soon I was quite at ease with him. He knew the country intimately and we drove to an Arab café with a French *patron*. It had a large garden with

little green arbours, made for lovers. The thick Arab coffee—was it only that?—made me feel strange and I asked for a *citron pressé*. It was brought with a few cakes, covered with what looked at first sight like large currants, but which proved on inspection to be enormous flies embedded in the jam. Brizet made me talk freely about myself, but said very little about himself: I wondered why. He asked if I was happy in the *pension* and I told him of my secret dream, which I knew my family would not approve, to have an apartment of my own. He was delighted at the idea and said he would try to find me one with a reliable maid and a piano and anything else I needed. From the café we walked through the country, beautiful but flat and with no trees. I was shocked to see the thinness of the animals, and the cruel way they were treated by their owners. Brizet told me it was useless to protest, it was in the people's blood and they could not change. I nearly wept and then was ashamed of my emotionalism and said abruptly I must go home.

It had been a wonderful evening. I felt as I had when I first met Louis, but there was more excitement and danger in this new friendship. Was it Brizet's personality? Was it the climate? Or had I changed? The barriers I had built so carefully round my life seemed to be crumbling, or rather opening gently, as later I saw the Golden Gate of the port of San Francisco open mysteriously to allow the great ships to glide into the freedom of the ocean beyond.

Our next opera was to be *Carmen*. We were called to rehearsal early in the morning to avoid the heat, for which I was grateful. First rehearsals always disturbed me. We sat in a shabby little rehearsal-room with the score on our knees, the stage-manager explaining his ideas of *Carmen* which we already knew. The Director and his wife sat almost in one chair, watching every move like the assessors in an auction room. When we went on to the stage and the pianist began

to play, I felt more at my ease and sang with full voice, unlike the other artists. I saw a look of approval on the Director's face and gave a real performance. To me Carmen was a gypsy of provocation and mystery, changeable but sincere in her moods and ready to pay the price of her desires. I was carried away in my scene with Brizet, his power as he sang was breathtaking—a blend of virtuosity and grace, all that the real toreadors possess. I wondered why he had come from Paris to this comparatively obscure Company, when he was so great an artist. I hoped he would tell me some day. At the end of the scene the Company and even the Directors applauded, though afterwards they warned me to save my voice and temperament for the future.

Rehearsals were not easy. The tenor was a complete bourgeois. I had to become more brazen than I wished, to try and kindle some emotion within him, and then console his jealous little wife by explaining that what I portrayed on the stage had nothing to do with my real feelings. Brizet never spoke to me during rehearsals except about our rôles—but one day as I was leaving, the stage doorkeeper gave me a note from him with the addresses of some apartments he had found, saying if I would like to see them with him and would walk slowly down to the Vieux Port, he would follow me. I was tired but delighted to go.

People recognised me in the street and to my embarrassment turned to look at me. When I reached the first address I hid in the courtyard behind the beautiful Mauresque iron gate and waited. Brizet arrived in a few minutes and took command. He went to the concierge and got the keys, and we went in and walked up the stairs together. The front of the apartment looked on to the Port, where the multi-coloured ships were nodding to each other in the fading sunlight. Wonderful mixed smells of tar and opium, flowers and unknown dangers rose from the dock. The bedroom was at the back and gave on to a steep hill, covered in flowers:

it was circular with many windows and a floor of beautiful mosaics. There were two sitting-rooms and a lovely kitchen with three orphan pans and a charcoal cooker. All the walls were whitewashed and covered with impossible pictures. I decided to take them down and leave only the shadows of the ships, rocking like great cradles in the port. For I had made up my mind that here I would live. Brizet asked if I would not see the other apartments, but I said: "No, this is for me."

I wanted to go immediately and buy things for my home, but he said I had better wait until the contract was signed. We saw the proprietress, who said she was honoured that I wished to live in her apartment, and the contract should be prepared. When I got back to the *pension*, I told Madame Bernac I would be leaving as I must have a piano and more space in which to work. Mona Lisa seemed in despair, and to console her I asked her to continue to look after my costumes and to dress me at the theatre.

The opening of *Carmen* was in a few nights and I tried to concentrate on that only and put the apartment from my mind. I was in love with my rôle, but the contrast between Brizet's temperament and the inhibitions of the tenor was too great and I was not looking forward to the performance.

When the night came and I went to the Opera House, there was even more than the usual first-night excitement in the air. *Carmen* always creates that atmosphere. She lives anew each time she is sung, and all singers—even tenors—have longed to portray her. The heat was intense and an enemy to grease-paint, so I decided to use no make-up at all, except for my lips and eyes—and the result was so successful that it became my custom from that night onwards. I was flattered in later years to learn from the great Duse that it was her custom too.

The first call came and my ear-rings were not to be found. They were not retrieved until the very last second and I

rushed on to the stage putting them into my ears, to the joy of the audience who applauded what seemed a realistic piece of stage business. As I turned to the tenor, inhaling my rose, to sing "*Quand je vous aimerai*," I found that make-up had improved his hitherto almost non-existent appearance and it was easier to think of him as Don José than as the business man with a fine voice that he had appeared to be at rehearsal. This brought new life to our scenes and to the performance, and even the chorus became individuals instead of a flock of tired sheep.

At the beginning of the second act I had a dance with the leader of the gypsy ballet, which I loved, and I was quite carried away. I improvised all kinds of Spanish dance-steps that I had never tried before, while the Gypsy Chief followed me with his knife in his mouth and a glint of murderous desire in his eyes. At the finale, as I twirled madly, the fringes of my shawl caught disastrously on the knife and dragged it out of his mouth, his teeth almost following. As I lay voluptuously in his arms, breathless but delirious with joy, and he swayed with my not inconsiderable weight, he hissed into my ear amid the tumultuous applause: "Have mercy, I beg. I need my teeth for the next performance."

Then came Brizet's entrance. He was resplendent in his toreador's costume, which made him seem much taller, and as we looked into each other's eyes for a second before singing and he threw his cloak on to the ground for me to walk on, I realised for the first time that he meant more to me than the toreador. To this day I cannot forget the emotion of that moment. The Toreador's Song, which he lived as he sang it, convinced me that he had everything within him that I could love. As he lifted his cape from the ground with the words, "*Qui m'aime y viendra!*" and strode out to the arena, I rushed after him in real abandon, to be dragged back by Don José, his emotions unleashed at last. As I tore myself away while he turned to stab me, the chorus, quite carried away, nearly threw him to the ground. The performance

finished as a triumph for everyone, the chorus wiping their foreheads and feeling they too shared the glory. It was a milestone in my career—and my life.

I returned home with Mona Lisa, too exhausted even to have supper with Brizet, and found a letter from Mamma awaiting me. In the night when sleep would not come, I opened it and learned wonderful news. She and Papa had decided to live in Paris, where the life would suit him better, and she promised to try to have an apartment ready for me to come to, when I left Algiers. How perfect it would be! To be with her again and in her own country with every possibility for my work and ambitions! I fell asleep at last with joy in my heart.

Next morning I found on my tray an unstamped letter from Brizet. It told me for the first time of his love and of the emotions I had inspired in him the night before. He said we must meet that day and settle the taking of the apartment. I was tremulously excited. I knew this would be the beginning of something I had never dreamed would come to me so soon. I longed for it, yet feared it. I had no one to turn to but my heart, and I prayed that it would not fail me.

When we met, I was ill at ease and aloof, trying to disguise my feelings. He did not refer to what he had written, but there seemed a new understanding between us. At the apartment I signed the contract and Brizet told me he had found me a piano and an Arab maid, young but reliable. Next day I took my possessions to the apartment and the following day moved in. I was elated unpacking my treasured souvenirs of home, my photographs, books and music, and when the piano arrived it was like a loved relation popping in on one as a surprise. Brizet helped me and did not need to be told where things should be placed: we had the same taste. Then the maid came and he left us. Her name was Fatma; she seemed quiet and moved beautifully and I engaged her.

In the evening Brizet came back, his arms full of flowers,

and parcels of food for our first meal together. It was like a dream, the lights from the harbour the only illumination in the room. We ate and laughed and discussed many things. Afterwards we sat on the balcony, watching the ships rocking gently together in a conversation of the seas. Then he told me again that he loved me and said he wished to prove his love in every way, but not if it was against my wishes. I must be as sure as he. I had no doubts, and his first kiss convinced me that this was what I most desired. The hours that followed opened endless vistas of ecstasy and beauty, and I changed completely in a night. I felt fulfilled, but became tormented, anxious and wildly jealous. Leaving me in the early hours of the morning, he said: "I would like to lock you here for ever." I smiled, but did not say that this was my feeling about him too.

In the ensuing weeks there were constant scenes between us. At the Opera House I could speak to no one when he was there: he was even jealous of the conductor with whom I had to rehearse. But when we were alone together it was bliss. We took walks in the country and in strange places ate strange native food, which I pretended to like, but loathed. The apartment was our secret orchard, in which I was happy as I had never been before.

Fatma proved a perfect little maid and became devoted to me. She did not sleep in the house and would enter in the mornings, not through the front door, but through one of my bedroom windows, carrying branches of flowers which she had gathered on the way. She would sprinkle me with their dew, saying it was a benediction and better for me than the Negro-black coffee that I loved on waking.

One morning, Brizet having stayed later than usual, she found us together. She put the flowers on the table and walked into the kitchen without a word.

That evening she danced for me, as she sometimes did, then kissed my hand and said she could not come until late

the next morning, as she had to visit the Holy Man, who lived on a boat far out in the sea. I asked her why, and she answered: "I must consult the Holy One about Monsieur your friend, to know if he is worthy of you and will not cause you pain, for I too love you, Mademoiselle."

I became furious and told her she must notice nothing in my life nor mingle in my affairs. With a look of reproach she left me. I wished she would never come back, for, in spite of myself, I dreaded what she would tell me.

Next morning, she came through the front door without flowers or smiles and would only say: "*Bon jour.*" For days she was silent and sullen until at last, exasperated, I forced her to speak. Then she told me. The Holy Man had said my lover belonged to another—he was a married man and the father of children.

The shock was so great I nearly fainted. I felt my world crumbling, yet somehow never doubted I had heard the truth. I sent her from the room and lay face downwards on the bed for long hours. This, I thought, is my punishment for so much joy. In the confessional the priest had consoled me for my sense of guilt. "There is little sin in profound love," he had said. But I could not share with another all that had been created in me—that would be stealing—a real sin. I longed to run away, but could not leave my work. Perhaps this suffering was to teach me that it must come first in my life. The apartment with all its sunshine had suddenly darkened; there seemed no reason to be there. If only I could get into one of the little boats and sail away without rudder or oars! But something told me that if I had the courage to sing and to face him that night, I would find the strength to go on.

That evening I walked on to the stage hearing everything as though from a far distance, but a calm, that could only have come from God, helped me to sing without a tremolo.

I had avoided meeting Brizet, locked my dressing-room door and refused to open it when he came, but he whispered to me that he would come to me after the performance.

When I got back to the apartment, he was waiting at the door: I was trembling so much I could hardly open it. We went into the moonlit studio and he asked: "In Heaven's name, what has happened since yesterday?"

I told him, praying desperately against my inner knowledge that he would deny it all.

He was silent for an eternal moment, then he said: "What you have heard is true. I left Paris and came here to break ties that were choking me and to make a new life. I have found that new life in you. I want to divorce my wife—then we can marry."

"But your children?" I asked. "We could not build our happiness on their desertion. And I have a duty towards my own family. I have failed them for the first time, and now I am punished. It must all end. Please go."

He protested desperately and begged me to take time to consider and to allow him to sleep on the floor even, but I knew I was utterly weak and if he stayed he would destroy my pitiful armour. I managed somehow to appear firm and strong, and at last he left. With a supreme effort, longing with all my being to call him back, I locked the door and turned to the window, to try to take from the moon and the sea and their family of ships the solace I could not find and the peace that I felt would never be mine again.

The Season was finishing in three weeks—weeks that were a living death. The colours seemed to have faded even from the flowers and sky. I no longer tried to understand the language of my beloved boats, but busied myself with a thousand unimportant things and I, who hated letter-writing, wrote letters by the score to try and forget the ache in my heart. I plunged into a fuller social life, the thing that bored me most, and accepted every invitation that came. At

least I could look forward with fanatical joy to being with Mamma in Paris, and wondered what the apartment and my reactions to living there would be like. Fatma knelt at my feet and begged me to take her with me. I answered: "Never!" She lay on the floor and sobbed, but I would not relent: I felt she too must suffer for what she had done to me.

Meeting Brizet at the Opera House took away the joy from my singing. Each day at the apartment there were flowers and a letter from him begging my forgiveness, and he tried on every possible occasion to speak with me. But I tried even to avoid looking at him, lest I should weaken. I did not want to put him right out of my heart, but knew I must keep him on its outskirts: it was such suffering that I wondered sometimes if it could be endured.

My last appearance of the Season was to be in *Carmen* and I dreaded its coming, for it would revive cruel memories of the wonderful opening night, when I first realised my love. Sorrow must have inspired me, for in my whole career I do not think I ever gave a better performance. At the end, the audience yelled and applauded and called my name and shouted: "Come back to us!" It was a wonderful experience, and I was elated and for the first time felt almost myself again.

I was leaving in a few days. The packing was done, everything was in order, it was the end. When the last moment came, I ran from the apartment without a backward look, nor would I linger over Fatma's distress. I must keep my little strength for a new beginning.

The ship was waiting to receive me like an amiable hostess. Friends and many from my audiences lined the quay with gifts of flowers and fruit and blessings for me on my way. How little a singer sees of the cities in which she gives so much, except the stations and harbours by which she arrives and leaves!

From the deck I looked back and saw Brizet standing, sad and aloof, at the top of the steps. I waved to him, then ran to my cabin, blinded by tears. That poignant chapter was closed. I would re-read it sometimes without bitterness but with gratitude, for all it had given me that had so enriched me and made the pain worthwhile.



New York



IN PARIS my parents were waiting for me at the station, peering through the dense crowds. Forgetting my luggage, I ran to embrace them, my hot tears almost burning their cheeks. What vast contrasts there are in the loves one can feel! There was so much to say I felt I would grudge sleep at night; it would be a waste of time.

Mamma had arranged the apartment with her unique taste. My own piano had been brought from England and my bedroom was all white; she said it was so fitting for a young girl. I was speechless with guilt; for the first time I held a secret, unshared with her, and felt dishonest. I was introduced to an attractive maid named Lucy, who looked at me approvingly, and we sat down to a wonderful meal. Mamma had remembered every detail of my greediness. With our elbows on the table, crusts of bread unfinished and glasses of wine helping to inspire the conversation, we talked endlessly. I felt rich and important to think that I had helped towards all this, but it was only a beginning. I must soon find another engagement. My parents were now my two children and I could not loiter for long.

Next day I went again to the agency and saw the business manager, a Monsieur Perez, who was partly blind and rather pathetic. He promised to let me know when he had anything to offer me.

A week later Lucy told me she had read in the morning

paper that a great impresario had come to Paris from America to engage artists for his opera house in New York: he was going to pay them millions. I read the article and was vaguely interested, but it faded from my mind until Monsieur Perez telephoned to tell me the same news and to add that he had made an appointment for me to meet the impresario at the Grand Hotel: his name was Oscar Hammerstein. When I told Mamma, she said that America was much too far away and she could not leave Papa to come with me. I laughed and said I hadn't been engaged yet and had no intention of going anyhow, but I could not refuse the interview.

Lucy went with me in her maid's dress, looking like a governess. She was very shrewd and said it would be a great chance for a young singer to go to America, as it was impossible to make a fortune in France by one's voice alone.

When we reached the Grand Hotel, we found the famous Mr. Hammerstein in a frock coat and his inevitable top hat holding court in the hall. I waited, then approached him and told him who I was and who had sent me. He looked at me for some time before answering and I returned the look. Then he said he regretted he had engaged three singers already for the same part and would not have room for any more, and, staring at me again, asked: "What do you look like in tights?"

I was furious and, turning on him, said I resented the question and was glad there was no room for me in his Company, then walked quickly away, tears of rage and humiliation in my eyes. I heard him calling after me, but did not even turn my head. With Lucy running after me, I hailed the first cab I saw and told the man to drive as fast as he could. When we reached our door, Mr. Hammerstein jumped out of another cab and tried to bar my way into the house, explaining that he had been joking and was sorry if he had hurt my feelings. I answered that I was not accus-

tomed to joking with people I did not know, pushed past him and shut the door.

Fortunately there were friends to lunch, so I had to pull myself together and there was no opportunity for my parents to ask about the interview. In the middle of the meal the telephone rang. Mamma hated interruptions at meal-times and asked Lucy to take the message. When we had finished, she came to me confidentially and, excitement darting from her eyes, said: "Mademoiselle, we are expected for an audition to-morrow with Mr. Hammerstein."

I shook with rage and, as soon as my parents had gone out, rang up the agency and told Monsieur Perez that Mr. Hammerstein had insulted me and, as I had no intention of going to America in any case, an audition would be useless. He became most agitated, told me I had taken the interview in the wrong way, said that this was a golden opportunity, for America was the Mecca of every artist, and begged me pathetically to take the audition, if only for his sake. In the end I reluctantly consented and his gratitude was touching, but I made up my mind that nothing would make me accept any offer I might receive.

When I arrived at the audition, I was horrified to see dozens of singers of every type waiting their turn. We were numbered and I was third. I had never seen the accompanist and, when I heard him play for the other artists, I knew he had the soul of a music-box—but was not so musical. I sang badly and cracked on my top note. This gave me a perverted joy, for I was sure it would prevent any offer of an engagement.

When I had finished, Mr. Hammerstein came to me with both hands outstretched, keeping everyone else waiting, and said he would have a contract made out for me to appear at his opera house, the Manhattan in New York. I answered that I had only taken the audition to please Mr. Perez and

had no intention of leaving my parents and going to America. He apologised again for what he called his "stupid remark" and I replied that the hurt was deeper than he could realise, then swept out, letting the train of my dress trail behind me on the dusty floor. It was my only smart dress, but I risked spoiling it for the sake of the dramatic exit.

Monsieur Perez had been at the audition and, having like all the blind a seventh sense, managed to waylay me as I was leaving and said he hoped I would do nothing rash, both for his sake and my own. Lucy too on the way home gave me her unasked-for advice. She had a very material soul, a spur to one side of my nature. A Gemini can always hear two voices arguing within him, and I usually listened to the wrong one, as far as practical advantages were concerned. Fortunes are not made in that way, and the few prosperous singers I have known have always put business first, but then they were not in love with their art, and without that love I would have been lost. I tried to explain this to Lucy, but she could only answer: "That will not buy you a house for your old age, Mademoiselle,"—a small house in the country to die in, the desire in every Frenchwoman's mind as the reward for her virtues or her sins. Had I taken Lucy with me to America, how much bigger would have been my bank balance! I often wonder what happened to her and if she achieved her dream before her old age: I hope she did.

Next day Monsieur Perez telephoned and said he had spoken to Mr. Hammerstein and begged me urgently to reconsider my decision: he offered me a sum beyond my wildest dreams for the Manhattan engagement, and it would be madness to refuse. I began to waver. Such a sum would mean security for my parents for a long while and help me to pay off the rest of the debt for my costumes. Had I the right of refuse?

I had a young Indo-Chinese friend in Paris, who was also

a pupil of Monsieur Tequi, with the voice of an amorous thrush in an English lane, and I decided to consult her. She was very unhappy, as she had just divorced her husband, whom she loved very much, and as I walked to her house, I thought: "Perhaps I will take her with me." "Then you're going?" I heard one of my Gemini voices say. "No, of course not," the other answered out loud, and the passers-by looked at me nervously.

Tati, my friend, gave me a lovely welcome. We talked first of the marriage to which she had looked forward so much and which was now nearly over. Then I told her of my American offer and she gave a scream of joy, said it was the most wonderful thing that could have happened for me and asked: "Will you take me with you?" I felt that if I did it would give her a new interest in living—and wavered still further.

The next day, as if fate would not be denied, a letter came from Ben telling us that his Government was sending him as first attaché to the Peruvian Embassy in Washington. If he were in America, home would not seem so far, and I knew it would be easier for my parents to let me go. The way was paved: it seemed I had to follow it.

That night, I crept into Mamma's room and told her that I had hesitated to accept Mr. Hammerstein's offer because of my love for her and an inner uneasiness, but everything had conspired to make me feel that for all our sakes I must go.

The silence seemed interminable, then she said: "You know the sacrifice it will be for me to see you go so far, but I want your career to be all that you deserve, and you must make the decision. But if you go, it cannot be alone."

Then I told her of Tati's unhappiness and my idea of taking her with me, and she exclaimed: "You are right: it will cure her suffering." But I did not tell her that Tati and I had already discussed it: I felt she might be hurt.

The days that followed were a haze of confusion. I was profoundly grateful to have Tati at my side. She went with me everywhere, gave me her sound French advice and was like an inexperienced mother. I had made it clear to Mr. Hammerstein that, unless she came with me, my family would not let me go so far away, and had suggested that with her sweet voice she might be engaged to sing small parts in the Company. He was most amiable to her and had not even asked for an audition.

We went down to the agency to sign our contracts. Monsieur Perez read mine over to me, but it conveyed nothing to my excited ears. I found later that he had done nothing to protect me. If only I had known then the unwritten dangers of those legal pitfalls. To think that just signing one's name can rob one of so much! To-day whenever I read a contract for others, I can sense instinctively where the danger lies, but, alas! it is too late now for myself.

A few days before we sailed, a large basket of flowers came for me from Mr. Hammerstein, with a card inviting Tati and me to dinner at the Grand Hotel the following night. My heart sank, as I felt I could not refuse, but Tati was delighted and said that bad beginnings ended well. What a false prophet she proved!

As we entered the hotel, the carpet on which I had walked on the first fatal day seemed to burn my feet. This time Mr. Hammerstein was most gracious. He had a strong, mobile face and was very definitely a personality, conceited and dictatorial, but he could be very kindly, and the people who worked for him loved him. He told us a great deal about America and the way he ran his opera house and of the great stars he had engaged—Melba, Mary Garden, Tetrassini, Renaud, Zenatello, Dinh Gilly and many others. I felt crushed. This would be my first real challenge, to be in a way competing with the greatest artists in the world. But I managed to smile and say what an inspiration it would be to

sing in such a Company. Then I asked in which opera did he propose I should make my *début*? He answered evasively that he had not made his plans yet: they must wait for New York.

I shall never forget those last days in Paris. Nobody seemed to want me to leave, and I was distracted at the thought of going so far and of what I should have to face. Even Papa was disconsolate and could not understand why I should go: he did not realise—or preferred to ignore for the sake of his now pathetic pride—that I had become the family breadwinner. I begged Mamma not to come to the station, and she seemed relieved.

We were sailing from Le Havre on the *La France*. When we reached the quay, it was like a world of its own. Colourful people with untidy clothes and endless bags proved to be members of an Italian opera company. The French artists for the Manhattan were neatly dressed and rushed on to the ship to see if they had been given the best cabins: if not, some of them settled into those that were not theirs. I closed my cabin door on the arguments that ensued, lay down on my berth and wept. I knew it was not the right attitude towards my work or my career, but all Latin artists have a horrible fear when they are to be transplanted to a country not their own. The Spanish, for instance, when coming to England, have to be fetched by the impresario and will weep for hours at the thought of the strange cooking, customs, people and the language that they cannot speak. Fundamentally, artists are only grown-up children with a talent bigger than themselves.

Throughout the voyage I had most of my meals in my cabin, but Tati went to the dining-room and reported many amusing things. She could not understand my sadness with all that had been promised me: I felt it was a premonition of unhappiness to come—and how right I was! The one thought that cheered me was that I should soon be seeing

Ben, though we had not been intimate since the old days when he taught us our classics. But he had encouraged me to start my career and if I could make him proud of me it would be a red letter day in my life. I received a cable from him on board saying he could not meet me on landing, but would try to see me the following week.

The morning we were due to arrive in New York, I went down to breakfast for the first time. The dining-room smelt like a zoo, so many people were eating stew. I asked the steward to bring me coffee on deck: I was trembling all over and Tati could neither understand nor console me. She was gay and seemed to have forgotten her sorrow, for which I was grateful.

On the quay the first thing that met our eyes was Mr. Hammerstein's top hat: I was beginning to think he slept in it. Members of both opera companies were surrounding him, but he was looking over their heads and came straight towards us, uncovering his head for the first time. He asked if we would feel too tired to dine with him that night, just by ourselves: I did not dare refuse.

The confusion of the American streets made me breathless; everybody seemed to be running. The shops were beautiful but the heat and humidity quite overpowering. It was the Indian summer, a difficult time in which to give a season of almost entirely French opera to an audience very Germanically inclined.

In the evening, Mr. Hammerstein fetched us in his big car and we drove down to a beach packed with crowds of gay people with strangely placed voices, wonderful physiques, kind smiles and apparently not a care in the world. We had a delicious shellfish dinner. Mr. Hammerstein never ate meat and I wondered if that was the cause of his extraordinary energy: to me he seemed a very old man. He talked to us of his grown-up family, all talented, and particularly of a daughter, Stella, who, though I did not know it, was to play

an important part in my association with him. I begged to leave early, as we had to report for work the next day and be introduced to the Company, the conductors and accompanists.

This was a great ordeal. Friendships are rarely made in opera companies: everyone is regarded as a potential enemy, and harmony is all-important to me in any relationship. The stage-manager and his wife were immediately antagonistic. He was a tiny Dutchman with a goatee beard, and she had been a singer in distant lands. Renaud and his wife were cold and dignified: as an artist he was supreme, though his voice had almost left him. The Sturani brothers, one a fine conductor who unfortunately died quite young, and the other a *répétiteur*, were friendly, and later proved themselves chivalrous and brave. Of the women, Madame Tetrassini was all warmth and kindness. She was accompanied everywhere by a young Roumanian secretary with extraordinary grey eyes, which changed expressively when one talked to him: this I did rarely, as the difference in their ages made her intensely jealous, and I respected this. Mary Garden was an original and dynamic singer with an art all her own and an actress of interesting mannerisms. She was an inspiring artist on the stage but a complete contradiction off it. I never tried to approach her, as she had made a great name and I was only a beginner. Her cult was her figure and I think she disapproved of mine. Gerville Reache was the principal contralto, a great singer, but not friendly and rather smug. I tried to meet everyone more than halfway, even when they put up a resistance, but no one tried to make me feel at home. Mr. Hammerstein often talked to me, but I did not want a personal relationship and only longed to start serious work.

The days passed. The climate was cooling down and the air so electrifying that sleep seemed superfluous. I felt full of energy and took long walks with Tati in Central Park with its dry grass, artificial rockeries and the gay children with

their Irish nurses. I reported regularly at the Opera House but became more and more depressed as I was neither given a rôle nor told when I was making my *début*. Ben, who had not been able to leave Washington, telephoned to know when it would be, as he wanted to come to it with friends, and I could only say that I knew nothing. I could not understand it and at last decided to speak to Mr. Hammerstein himself.

I was shown into his office, a large room filled with impressive books and statues of the great composers in funereal white marble. He was sitting at a big desk at the very end of the long room. I sat down and tried to appear calm and impersonal. He gave very evasive answers to all my questions and finally said: "I have not really got acquainted with you yet, you see, and that will take a little time."

"But it is my art you have engaged, Mr. Hammerstein," I answered. "Don't let us confuse that with friendship."

He smiled and in a subtle way made me realise that my appearances would depend on my attitude towards him and on, as he put it, my "complying with his plans." Something died within me, but I tried not to show I realised what he meant, and asked him to write down his plans, so that I could discuss them with my brother in Washington.

He seemed disturbed at the idea of my having a brother in America and asked his name. When I told him, giving him his full title, he became infuriated and suddenly shouted: "I have my spies, Mademoiselle D'Alvarez, and I know that is not your brother but your lover."

If I had not been so angry, I could have burst out laughing, but I was so indignant I could only walk out of the room without a word.

A few days later, Maestro Struani called on us. He asked why I looked so sad and I answered: "Because I don't know when—if ever—I am going to sing."

He looked at me gravely.

"The Old Man (as they called Hammerstein) is crazy about you," he said, "and you are in his hands. You can do nothing but try and impose your rights."

I was horrified and cried out that I would throw up everything and go home: I could not fight such a battle. But he made me see I could not do that, for if I broke my contract I could be sued for a huge sum.

"Go in and win," he said. "My brother and I will help you in any way we can." And he advised me to go to the stage director and insist on rehearsing my rôles, and offered to practise secretly with me himself in the hotel. I felt rich in having found such a friend, and determined to take his advice, though I was frightened and sick at heart.

I had as yet received no salary, though I was supposed to be paid by the week, and had not been able to send any money home, so I now decided to ask for it and went to the cashier, a sly little man with a fox's expression. He said he could do nothing about it and I must ask Mr. Hammerstein's son. When he came, he looked me up and down and said he would have to speak to his father.

The next day I was told that Mr. Hammerstein wanted to see me, and I went up again to his room. He was standing there, taut with rage, and did not even ask me to sit down. I did so, however. Then he told me that I appeared to be much too independent and, as I had refused his friendship, I should not sing and he would use me for rehearsals only, and he proceeded to retail horrible stories that had been concocted against me.

"If those were true," I answered, "they would not concern my career, but they can easily be disproved, and if you believe them, it can only come from a diseased mind. I demand my personal freedom, Mr. Hammerstein, the same treatment as your other artists, and my appearances before the public."

"Only when the three leading contraltos drop dead," he answered.

"I won't pray for that, but I will have my appearances nevertheless," I retorted—and left him.

From that day my life became a miniature hell. I do not want to dwell on the misery and persecution I suffered. The past is past and no one better than I can understand jealousy and emotional frustration, but I was a young girl and Mr. Hammerstein an all-powerful dictator, surrounded by satellites only too willing to drag me down. More scurrilous tales about me, all of which he chose to believe, were poured into his ears. I was ostracised by the other artists in the Opera House, except for a few loyal friends. And still I received neither rôle nor salary.

One day in the Opera House a tall, good-looking young man introduced himself to me. He said his name was Carasa; he was a Spaniard and had a wonderful tenor voice. Might he come and see me? I was touched by his childish conceit and said yes. That same evening he appeared with his charming smile and a naïve box of chocolates, the picture on the lid so enticing that I knew it was a sacrifice to the quality of the chocolates. He told us he was making his début the following week as Mario in *La Tosca* and would see that Tati and I were sent tickets. He wanted me to sit in a box where everyone would see me and ask who I was, as they had not yet had a chance to hear me sing. Why was it, he asked, since the comments on my voice in rehearsal had been marvellous? Tati began to explain, but I stopped her with a look and encouraged him to talk about himself, which he was delighted to do.

On his opening night I wore my most exciting dress of white satin, with white fox round the hem and sleeves. Tati looked lovely, and her happiness was so contagious that for that evening I forgot the black cloud over my head. We sat in the artists' box, in which were a few members of the Company: they barely spoke to us, but examined us from head to foot with an unkind interest. Mr. Hammerstein came in,

supposedly to listen to Carasa, and asked if I knew him. I hesitated, then said: "No, I have only met him."

After the opera we had been invited to supper in one of the smartest New York restaurants by some patrons of the Opera House named Proctor, civilised and travelled people with artistic tastes. At the table was an empty seat and they told me they had invited Carasa. I was pleased but embarrassed, as I could not enthuse over his voice as I had expected. It had rather a cockerel quality, not in harmony with his figure. He arrived, radiant, and many people, recognising him, stood up and applauded. He bowed with charm and, taking my hand, forced me to rise from the table as if to present me to an audience. Nobody quite knew what it meant, but they were enthusiastic and many came to be introduced to me and to hear Carasa's flowery Spanish compliments, which I had to translate and modified in the translation.

It was a gay evening. In our party was a quiet, rather austere man, who hardly spoke but was interesting nevertheless. Mrs. Proctor told me he was very musical and a great lawyer, but not a ladies' man. She said rather flippantly: "If ever you need good advice, don't forget him." The thought of going to law horrified me, but in America it is an everyday occurrence. The first thing that struck me in the American newspapers was the number of beautiful girls, so recently married, who were suing their husbands for the most amazing reasons. The men are held up at pistol point for everything their women desire and always get: that, I think, is why America is a land of so many widows.

The morning after the supper-party, a page boy brought me a letter from Mr. Hammerstein saying he wished to see me. My heart sank, but later in the day I went again to his Chamber of Horrors. He was sitting as usual at his desk and in front of him was a list of the reasons that, he said, made it impossible for me to sing in his opera house. First, I had been seen, he announced, having supper with Señor Carasa,

and he could not allow his artists to be compromised by going out with each other. Then, more information he had received about my private life had very much disturbed him, for his was an opera house of morality. Before he could continue, I said I would not listen to any more malicious lies and got up to leave the room, but he ran round in front of me and tried to lock the door. I could easily have killed him at that moment and regretted I had no weapon.

"Very well," I said, "I will sit here until you bring the people with whom you have been discussing me."

At that moment there was a knock on the door, in came a grey-haired man with glasses, and I took the opportunity to escape. In the vast hall of the Opera House, as I crossed it, were many artists, who all turned their backs on me: they were cowards and I despised them.

Arrived back at the hotel, I found Carasa with Tati. He was pale and trembling and said he must tell me of the terrible scene there had been that morning. Hammerstein had summoned him and many of the men singers with whom I had rehearsed to the library of the Opera House and there had made them swear on the Bible to tell the truth and confess if they had ever kissed me and what their relationship with me had been. Carasa said he and the Struani brothers had answered that it was shameful to try and soil the reputation of a young and talented singer at the outset of her career, that they knew only good of me, and if it cost them their positions, they would defend me. Carasa himself had added he would be proud to marry me, and Hammerstein had ordered him out of the Opera House like a dog.

I felt I could stand no more. I had developed a dull pain in my heart and was terrified of becoming ill. Next day I rang up the Proctors and asked them for the silent lawyer's name and address, made an appointment with him and went down with Tati to his office.

At first he showed very little interest in me and I felt as if I were talking into a dictaphone, but when I told him how Hammerstein had thought Ben was my lover because he had a title, he laughed so loudly that the chandelier began to tremble. I laughed too out of politeness and Tati joined in, though, not speaking English, she had no idea what it was all about. After that everything went splendidly. The lawyer said he knew Hammerstein personally and would tackle him in a less legal way on that account and I must not worry.

"I am told you have a magnificent voice," he said, "and America has got to hear it soon, and when she does, it's got to be great." I left the office walking on air.

On the way home, I felt we were being followed and, turning, saw a man shoot round the corner and was sure I recognised him as Brignoli, the man with glasses who had come into Hammerstein's room when I was there. I told Tati and she said I must be dreaming.

Within a few days I heard from the lawyer that he had seen Mr. Hammerstein, who had denied almost everything and said I had exaggerated a few little comments he had made. He seemed afraid of a scandal, however, and had offered as a concession to let me rehearse on the stage and be a stand-in for the other contraltos. This, my lawyer said, he had flatly refused to agree to and had demanded my appearances in public and my money up to date. We must now wait and see what happened.

I saw Struani, told him the news and asked after Carasa. He said he had become very ill from shock and could see no one. Actually I never saw him again. He developed dropsy and, when I was in California, Grace Moore's teacher told me he had taken care of him for several months and had then put him on the boat and sent him home to Spain. But he was never able to sing again. To this day I cannot think of him without sadness and a sense of responsibility, though it all happened through no fault of my own.

The lawyer proved my fairy godfather, for in a few days my money was forthcoming and I was told that I was to start rehearsing the Mother in *The Prophet* for my début. With the elasticity of youth, my spirits soared. I worked delightedly, avoided Mr. Hammerstein as much as possible, and felt my troubles were over. But there were still minor persecutions.

One day Hammerstein summoned Tati to his room and told her through a member of the chorus, who interpreted, that he was sending her to sing in comic opera in Canada, as he could according to her contract. He knew, of course, she was my staunch friend and wanted to hurt and weaken me. She was distracted and said she had promised my mother not to leave me and she would refuse to go. Providentially our lawyer friend found that the clause in the contract about Canada had been erased and she won the battle.

Another day, as I was leaving the Opera House, I was stopped by a very good-looking young man. He told me he was the youngest reporter on the *Times*, had heard strains of my voice in rehearsal and had thought it "swell." We became friendly at once and, with American unselfconsciousness, he offered me an ice-cream, one of my pet vices. He said he was looking forward to my début, but warned me that the Press had been instructed by the Opera House not to eulogise me, as I was very unreliable and temperamental and, if I had a success, would become quite unmanageable. I was horrified, but when he saw my dismay he only laughed and said: "It's good publicity. Live up to it. The Old Man is clever and will make a big future for you." "I don't think so," I answered, "and I mean to make it for myself." He laughed again. I found him very intelligent, with a wisdom beyond his years, and when we parted I said I would like to see him again and asked him his name. It was Carl Van Vechten.

After many delays the date of my *début* was fixed at last. Rehearsals had exhausted me, but I had gained confidence from the encouragement and admiration of the other singers. Zenatello, who played the part of my son, at the end of the most difficult aria one day in a burst of enthusiasm took me in his arms and kissed me, crying: "Brava, bambina!" This was reported to Mr. Hammerstein and led to a scene that nearly ended in a lawsuit. Those who had been onlookers, however, were able to swear that it was not my lips, but my forehead, that had been kissed—and the turmoil subsided.

Ben wrote he was coming for the opening night: I wished it could have been later. He did not understand the mental agony of serious artists before creation and the cloistered ways through which they must pass. American singers alone seem able to live every moment of their lives: a party before an appearance means nothing to them. Latins will crouch in the dark, weep and ask wildly why they had chosen this career that was a living hell.

On my all-important night, there was a knock on my dressing-room door and Madame Tetrassini came in, as I was trying to paint some wrinkles on my unlined face. She laughed wholeheartedly, but said a little wistfully: "How wonderful is youth!"

"It's nothing," I ventured to answer, "compared with the art that only experience and the years can bring."

She gave me a little bottle of water in which she had put spoonfuls of sugar and told me to take sips between the acts and have an enormous meal afterwards, as she always did. I loved her and have many memories of her kindness and sound advice. Once I was singing with her at a charity concert outside New York. I helped her to dress, and suddenly a dismayed expression crossed her smiling face. She had lost her earrings, Canary diamonds, the size of small saucers. "Margherita," she begged, opening the top of her bodice,

"look for them here." When I finally found them, hidden under one of her very opulent breasts, she said thankfully: "Remember, that is the only safe place for your jewellery in a foreign country."

After she had left I finished dressing and waited. Suddenly Mamma's perfume seemed to pervade the room and I put out my hand as if to touch her. The Italian call-boy knocked on the door and I walked to the stage like an automaton. The wings were full of the other artists, but I felt completely alone. Mr. Hammerstein was sitting there in a wooden arm-chair with his top hat and cigar: I avoided the three of them. The sight of my dear Maestro Struani on the conductor's stand gave me courage and blessing from afar. My entrance came, I felt a sudden calm and, in the great aria that always brought back memories of the Conservatoire, "Oh, my son, be thou blessed," I was in another world. At its end, and at the end of the act, there was thunderous applause. I flew back to my dressing-room, weeping with excitement and emotion, and Tati, also weeping, hugged me and said: "You have won, my darling, you have won." How grateful I was to have her with me! She was so intelligent and could give constructive criticism without hurting me, because she loved me and only longed for my success. We locked the door and I would not allow anyone in, although I heard Mr. Hammerstein's heavy foot-steps and there were repeated knocks for admission.

At the end of the opera, I could have begun all over again, my voice was as fresh as ever. I could still hear the applause and whistles of the appreciative Italians ringing in my ears and I was happy, though, as always, there were things I knew I could have done better, and they tormented me. Mr. Hammerstein came and congratulated me; Struani kissed my hand and then my forehead; my lawyer's intelligent handshake was a language in itself; my Italian maid kissed the hem of my dress, saying: "How I wish you were my mother,

Signorina!" We were about the same age, but I was still wearing my white wig, though the wrinkles had disappeared with sweat and excitement. Ben had sent a message at the last moment that he would not be able to wait and see me after the performance, but would be coming to the hotel in a few days. I was thankful, as I was longing to get to bed. As always after every performance, nervous fatigue was overpowering me. Unlike real mothers, I had my labour pains after the child was born.

I had had a very great success, which was immediately followed by offers of new and tempting engagements, including one from the Metropolitan Opera House and a contract from the biggest gramophone company. I could have become rich overnight, but—and it was a tremendous but—I could accept nothing without Hammerstein's consent, for the contract I had signed through Monsieur Perez gave him a binding hold over me. That signature was the biggest mistake of my career.

When I approached Hammerstein he was at first conciliatory. He told me that the unfortunate things that had happened were all because he was in love with me, to which I answered that love can be a very misused word, and, if it meant the cruelty he had shown me, then I never wished to feel it. He at once became violent and said that what he could not get in one way, he would try to get in another, and when I showed him the offers I had received, his face became a study in Machiavellian slyness. He said he had had other offers too, that would make my fortune if he allowed me to accept them, but I was entirely in his hands and everything would depend on the way I treated him. I felt utterly helpless—I was a prisoner chained hand and foot. All I could say was that I could never love him, but I had faith in my future even if he had the power to keep away from me the things that were mine by right.

When I told Tati of the interview, she said: "I don't think they hang women in America, darling, and I can lend you a revolver." But my sense of humour had begun to come back and I answered: "I can't use one for two reasons—I've got astigmatism and I want to sing in public, not in prison."

But though I tried to laugh, I felt desperate and longed to leave the hateful Manhattan, then and there, before the end of the Season. But that too was hopeless. How could I break my contract—that disastrous contract which was the root of all my troubles?

When Ben at last came to see us, he said he had been overcome by my reception on the opening night and was complimentary, but constructively critical, about my performance. "How did Mr. Hammerstein react?" he asked. I could see Tati was longing to tell him of the nightmare we had been living through and of the present situation, but I stopped her with a look. I knew too well what Ben's reactions would be: he would make a scandal and it would damage his career, which was as precious as my own. Fortunately he seemed very interested in Tati, and it was easy to answer vaguely and change the subject. She had a feline charm and, in spite of her intelligence, appeared quite helpless, which has a charm in itself for men: efficiency in a woman is fatal if she is to be desired. He took us out to dinner in a famous restaurant, now no more, the Knickerbocker Hotel. With its gilded furniture and crystal chandeliers it was a great contrast to the small places I loved, often in basements, filled with stuffy smells of onion, wine and smoke, always managed by an ex-singer with a delightful knowledge of food and a repertoire of admiring glances, both conducive to over-eating.

Over the meal, Ben told us he thought our hotel too commercial and not worthy of us in any way. I did not dare say I was worried about my responsibilities towards our parents, for he was convinced that my success would lead to other

lucrative engagements, and I must not undecieve him.

The next day he insisted on showing us rooms in another hotel, where he wanted us to live. They were so delightful that I determined to have faith in the future, take them, and not worry about the cost. The rainy days might never come and surely the sun would shine in some unexpected place, I told myself—such is the optimism of youth.

Before we left our hotel, the manager told us that the whole time we had been there we had been spied on by an employee of the Opera House—a grey-haired man with glasses: it was that same Brignoli, Hammerstein's "Spoletta." I felt quite sick and longed to fly down to the quay and jump on the first boat for home, but Tati only laughed and said that in the new hotel our rooms were at the back, so no one would be able to see even the lights in our windows.

We moved in the following week and felt like successful prima donnas. Such luxury! The sheets were even changed every day, which was almost disturbing. A new gaiety came into our lives. There were invitations to parties and for me more offers of work in different parts of America. Although I could not accept them, they made me feel important and convinced me the day would come when I would be free from the handcuffs that bound me now.

At the Opera House I sang *Delilah* after the *Mother and* felt exhilarated and another being. Struani almost hypnotised me with his conducting: it was like a strange love affair to sing under him, a duet of emotions in complete unison, an intimacy impossible to express in words. Between the acts on the first night, he came to my dressing-room and kissed the palms of my hands as he looked at me for seconds without speaking. I was moved to the point of almost fainting; it was something that only happened two or three times in my life. How good to be able to remember and re-live such emotions!

My notices were wonderful, I was told by friends, and they

advised me to make an album of them, but I knew I would never read it: I would be embarrassed by the good things and extremely annoyed by the bad. My only anxiety was that I had not had any letters from home for a long while, not even an answer to my cables telling of my success. One day my Italian maid, Maria, came mysteriously and told me that the caretaker of the Opera House needed my help and wished to see me secretly: would I go with her to his home? It was very important. I was mystified but said I would go.

When we reached the house, the door was opened hesitantly and we entered a shabby room in which were the caretaker and his wife. She was weeping and held in her arms a baby like a little wax doll, barely breathing. When he saw me, the caretaker fell on his knees and said: "Signorina, I am a wicked man—I am also a poor man and Mr. Hammerstein has paid me to use my knowledge of French to translate your mail for him and then I have destroyed it. I have also destroyed flowers you have been sent. Now our baby is dying, but if you forgive me I feel God will spare him and I will never sin again."

I was stunned, but moved—in spite of the theatricality of it all—and could only say I forgave him and would send a doctor and pray for his baby. Then I left with Maria, overcome by this new revelation of what an old man's jealousy could do. I felt my nerves would soon break down, but fortunately the end of the Season was approaching.

I arranged to have my mail sent to the post office, and on my way back went into a neighbouring church in an effort to find calm and consolation. As I went to light a candle at the feet of the Madonna, I saw Mr. Hammerstein standing at the back of the church. I tried to escape by a side door, but he came towards me and begged me to put a hundred-dollar bill in the poor box for him. I put it in the box nearest the Madonna of Miracles. Then he begged me to go with him to a nearby café, where we could talk and he would

make me understand many things, he said. I said I would talk with him only in the Opera House, and that strange look of a police dog one cannot trust came into his eyes.

"It's now or never," he exclaimed.

"Then it's never," I answered. He again said that all that had happened was because of his love for me. "I don't want love, only justice," I retorted and almost ran out of the church into a taxi. Everybody knew him and turned to stare at him as he stood looking after me.

I had three more appearances and then the end of the Season—freedom—Paris—home! Tati and I whispered about our departure, fearing the walls had ears. We planned to leave in a small ship, in which none of the other artists would sail, and all the arrangements were made by our kind lawyer friend. He would not take a dollar for all he had done for me, and promised that after we had left he would talk very frankly to Mr. Hammerstein. And when I came back to America, he said, speaking as though it were a *fait accompli*, he would draw up my contract with pistols and I would be able to win not only the artistic success I had already had, but a financial triumph as well. "And then," I added, "I will pay your bill."

On the last day the dear Struanis and a few other friends came to the hotel. We drank to our reunion some day, took affectionate farewells and left: we wanted no one to see us go. Maria, the Italian maid, was in the cab, hardly visible under a mountain of hatboxes, umbrellas and last-minute parcels: she had been a modest, devoted friend and I loved her and felt there were muted bells in her heart. I wanted to weep when I left her and she clung to me in a tender embrace.

On board the ship I suddenly felt frightened. I went to my cabin and locked the door, leaving Tati on deck. In the distance I heard shouting through a megaphone: "Ship departure retarded; passenger late." My heart stopped. Could

it be——? A knock on the door. I unlocked it and Tati rushed in.

"The passenger they are waiting for is Hammerstein!"

My instinct had been right. I told her she must avoid him through the voyage and I would stay in my cabin until we reached France. This I did and gave strict orders to the stewardess that on no account, and however big a tip she might be offered, was she to admit anyone: if she did, I would report her to the Captain. Flowers were sent in with a card saying it was no use trying to evade him, but I ignored it.

In these conditions it was difficult to get the rest I so badly needed. I kept on wondering why he had left New York. Then like a bombshell came a cable from our lawyer telling me that the Manhattan Opera House had been sold and that the new Directors had given new contracts to all the artists except myself, one of the conditions of the sale apparently being that they should not re-engage me. I was overwhelmed. How could a big personality take such a paltry revenge? Only the thought that every wave was carrying me nearer home partly consoled me.

While we were waiting to go through the customs at Le Havre, Mr. Hammerstein approached me. He said that the crossing had given him time for thought and there was much he would like to explain, if I would see him: he would be staying some time in Paris. I answered: "It is too late for explanations; nothing can be changed now"—and left him.

Mamma was waiting to meet me in Paris, standing there with her bright auburn hair and flat little hat of Parma violets; her wonderful smile illuminated the drab station. She took me in her arms and I longed to stay there forever. I felt older and different, but she would never change.

It was a glorious homecoming. The concierge welcomed me with—for him—a beaming smile; Lucy was waiting in the hall; even Papa left his game of patience to embrace me and

ask teasingly if the cowboys rode as well as people said, or weren't they to be found in opera houses? Tati was staying for dinner and to sleep the night. The meal we sat down to was a poem. Mamma had painted the menus herself with musical instruments in my honour. The table was loaded with my favourite foods, and bottles of Papa's best wines stood silently waiting, as though conscious of their power. Love and security were mine again. I was home.



Marseilles



AGAIN I must find an engagement. Soon after my return to Paris, I went to see Monsieur Perez to discuss possibilities. He beamed on me and said Mr. Hammerstein had already spoken to him and offered, as he still held an option on my work in America, to take me back; although I had behaved in a very eccentric and unpleasant way at the Manhattan, he was willing to overlook it. I laughed loudly and ironically. "Tell Mr. Hammerstein," I said, "that that is the best joke I have ever heard. I never wish to work for him again."

Monsieur Perez was shocked and agitated. He argued with me vehemently and tried to persuade me to change my mind, but this time I was adamant. Seeing that it was hopeless, he finally said: "Well, you are very foolish, and the only other place I can offer you is Marseilles. It is a good company, but you cannot expect there anything like the salary you have been earning."

"I want peace of mind and fair treatment," I answered. "If I can have those and just scrape along, I shall be satisfied."

Next day I met the Director of the Marseilles Company, a tall, bearded man with a charming manner.

"I hope I may count you among our Company," he said. "You will be well surrounded; they are future stars; and we will try and make you very happy."

He told me that Marseilles was gay and picturesque and there were two music-loving publics to judge the artists, one of business men and bankers, the other of fishermen, both equally intelligent and sincere. I loved this idea and was overjoyed at the thought of making—as I imagined—the final breach with Hammerstein and of working nearer Mamma, so I agreed to go.

Tati was heartbroken when I told her, as there would be no place for her this time, and she said she would go back to Saigon in Indo-China, her native land. I tried to persuade her to stay in Europe, but she would only agree to come and pay me a visit in Marseilles before she left. She said she had had the urge to go home for a long while.

I had just one month's holiday, and the days became hours, as they always do when one is happy. I sat alone in cafés, watching the world go by, exhilarated by freedom and the joy of living at home again. I re-met old friends and made new ones. Of the latter, the most interesting was Madame de Rouvier, the mother of a friend of Tati's, whom I had met in New York. She was a most distinguished personality, a widow, who had been the mistress of a King, and she had the wisdom that a long life and much experience had given her. She lived in a *petit hotel* with a long narrow garden, which had grass of a tender, virginal green and silvery paths like trails of satin ribbon. At its end was a stone statue of the goddess Venus, on whose lovely bosom sparrows perched by the dozen, to the great annoyance of the gardener, who had to wash her gracious body every day. The luxury and perfect taste of the household were a joy to me. The *cuisine* was superb and at the perfect meals conversation was brilliant and inspiring. There is nothing the French cannot say; it is always with subtlety and in good taste. Never in any land have I entered a more interesting circle; I remember meeting there Clemenceau, Santos-Dumont, Zaharoff, and many others.

Madame de Rouvier took a great fancy to me and one day said she wished I had been her daughter. "I love my own child, of course," she added, "but she is quite indifferent to beauty, atmosphere, poetry, and all that means so much to me. Real intelligence is the instinctive understanding of things without knowledge; that can come later. She takes after her father; he was a great soldier but a very blunt man."

"Being married to you must surely have influenced him," I ventured.

She smiled and answered: "Men may be actors for a time, *ma chère*, but underneath they never change."

The time came to pack and set off again. More struggles, more people to conquer, perhaps more persecution: the Manhattan had made me afraid. Mamma and Tati took me to the station and we all wept as the engine with its magnanimous strength carried me away to the new battlefield.

Marseilles oozed danger, and I did not feel really safe until I reached the apartment in the Rue Grignon which some friends of Tati's had taken for me. It was sunny and shabby and fortunately very near the police station. I opened the windows wide and the air poured in, laden with garlic. The landlady was silver-haired, with the smile of a girl of twenty and teeth like virgin almonds. A canary was singing at the top of its voice and she said: "He never sings unless he likes people." I asked tentatively for the bathroom and was shown a small hipbath; I would have to wash in halves but did not care, for I felt I was going to be happy there.

When I went to the Opera House, Monsieur Sauget, the Director, welcomed me warmly and I found to my delight that the conductor was Van Dongen, with whom I had worked in Algiers. He bowed almost exaggeratedly when he saw me, which meant that he had heard of my American success. It was going to be a wonderful change, to be fêted

instead of ignored, and even if life were a financial struggle I would be more than compensated.

I was asked to choose the opera for my début and I chose the difficult *La Favorita*, to be followed by *Samson* and *Carmen*. The company were all "troupers," the tenor a little portly but sympathetic and a very good singer. We became friends and I begged him to eat a little less before the *Carmen* opening, but he looked crestfallen and said: "My wife would worry if I ate less and became attractive to other women, and it might ruin our marriage."

On the night of my début I went to the Opera House as excited as ever. There was a telegram waiting from Mr. Hammerstein, hoping I would not regret singing in a provincial town. Certainly my shabby dressing-room was very different from the Manhattan. There was no carpet, the lights on the dressing-table were hardly strong enough, the dresser spoke with such a southern accent it was difficult to understand her. But I was happy.

When I came down the stairs to the stage in my costume of white satin entirely embroidered with pearls, there were exclamations of "Oh" and "Ah" from the other artists. It was really too beautiful in comparison with theirs and I was embarrassed, but the Director was enthusiastic.

I could feel the audience sitting in judgment as I began my aria, "*O mio Fernando*," but when I took my E natural with apparent ease, the applause was unanimous. Unfortunately my friend the tenor had a slight cold and after he had sung his aria, as I thought very well, there were hisses, and insults were screamed at him. I put up my hand and said, "Give him a chance, please," and there was silence. I should not have done it, and might have been dismissed on the spot, but injustice always maddens me and his gratitude was touching.

He explained: "You see, I am the father of a family and

cannot buy drinks for the patrons or spend money on the girls, so they resent my engagement."

I was shocked that anything so personal should enter into art, and I begged Van Dongen to let me rehearse with him apart from the others, and in *Samson* we both had a great success. In that rôle his portliness was almost an asset, and after a fine performance Monsieur Sauget complimented him in front of the company.

The days slipped away. My landlady was an angel, I basked in the sunshine, spent little money, and the misery I had gone through in New York became pastel-shaded. Then, to complete my happiness, I heard that Mamma was coming south to stay with me.

But Tati came first. She arrived, looking more French in clothes and more Chinese in expression than ever before. I laughed about this and she suddenly told me what I had half-guessed already, that she had one quarter of Chinese blood in her veins.

"It is my great secret," she said.

"But it is an asset, darling," I exclaimed; "why hide it?"

"Because of what goes with it."

And she told me what I had never guessed, that she had inherited from her father a love of opium-smoking, and that was why she must go home for at least three months, to be with her friends, who were all addicts.

"Our smoking parties are just like social parties," she said, "but an escape from reality, which Society never is."

Then I remembered how in America she had locked herself in her room for hours and I had wondered why. I was horrified, but fascinated. How fortunate for me that I have been able to find in my imagination my intoxicant and "escape from reality." I begged her to try and break this slavery, to remarry and keep up her singing, as we might some day be together again in another opera house, but I knew as I talked that advice was useless. When we said goodbye, I

was doubly sad—to lose her, and for such a reason; but Mamma's visit came soon afterwards and that was my consolation.

We had a wonderful time together. We visited the Old Port on the days when the shepherds came from Algiers with their flocks, looking like the evangelistic shepherds in the Bible—but with a different sort of prayer. We saw the flower-vendors and the fisherwomen, who were a people apart. They wore large, real diamonds in their ears and had their hair waved every day, so badly that it made them look like Africans. They sat in big crinoline petticoats with their thighs wide apart, holding their baskets with affection between them and wearing on their feet wooden clogs, lined with straw, that were, they said, the secret of their never catching cold. If one refused their wares, they handed one insults with a smile.

I remember a little church we entered, where in the loneliest corner stood a slim, beautiful Madonna, gazing from her niche with such compassion in Her beautiful eyes that the tears of sorrow were dried in Her presence. In Her hands were red cotton roses, and it was said that on All Saints' Day, the Day of the Dead, those modest roses sent forth a pungent odour for which none could account. The lining of Her mantle is so blue that the sailors christened Her the Madonna of the Oceans and, on fierce nights before putting their frail fishing boats to sea these rough men would come and stand before Her, their rugged hands, that fight men and storms, clasped like little children's, holding tallow candles to light at Her feet for their protection, and some brought their newborn children for Her to bless. No one, not the poorest tramp, dared steal the coins dropped at Her feet or the humble rosaries, made of heavy cords and babies' first teeth, emblems of their deep gratitude and devotion. The old sacristan's special offering was a feather duster, made from the plumes of a beloved white peacock. I sat for long

before Her, entranced by a divine presence, so definitely felt that it was uplifting, and I swear I saw Her smile: I did not dare move lest I should disturb that miracle of beauty.

Mamma and I also visited the quarter where "Maya" lived, the greatest theatre I had ever entered—narrow, winding streets with little rooms with bead curtains over the doors, where stood the women, offering their charms to hungry sailors of every nationality. They stared at us and some of them recognized me and were gentle in their compliments. Could they possibly be whores? It was hard to believe. Mamma hurried a little. We should not have been there unaccompanied, but if you do not know danger it rarely touches you.

I begged Mamma to stay until the Season was over but she had to leave, as Papa wrote he was very lonely and she would soon be going to England to be with my sister Suzie, who was expecting her second child.

I was in love with Marseilles and hated the thought of saying goodbye. For my last appearance I chose *Carmen*. The tenor wore a corset bought especially for the occasion. Looking at him I realised why so many portly Frenchmen have such strange figures: they too must wear corsets. At the end of the performance the other artists received gorgeous presents of jewellery, furs, sewing machines even. I was handed a large bouquet of red roses mounted on equally large pieces of wood, and a small black blotter with insufficient blotting paper in it to mop up my tears of disappointment. Consolation came when the others told me: "D'Alvarez, we pay the shops to send us these gifts, so that the Director will be impressed and renew our engagements. We have to send them back to-morrow."

My wonderful landlady gave a farewell supper for me with a few of her friends, who were my great admirers, and she allowed me to invite some of my own friends from the Company. It was a splendid evening. She wore her white lace

wedding-dress and I sent her white roses that I said were her sisters. The food and drink were perfect and we all got very gay. At the end I made a speech and said I hoped to come back to Marseilles and live with our hostess again, and she must be sure to send me the bill for the damage done to the ceiling below when I got into the hipbath and the water overflowed. The applause was deafening and the tenor, raising his glass, said: "D'Alvarez, we love you, and that there may never be less of you is our ardent prayer."

Next morning I went to say goodbye to the Old Port. As I was sitting on a wine-barrel, watching the ships, hands smelling of unadulterated fish were clapped over my eyes. Removing them, I found they belonged to an old, beclugged fisherwoman with a stomach like a tea-tray. She told me it was she who had sent me the blotter the night before and she would never forget the top B which I had given in the Seguidilla.

From the Port I went to the theatre to collect my things. Everyone was unbearably sweet to me: I could not believe I would never see them again. A bunch of violets was tied on the knob of my dressing-room door with love from the stage-hands. The conductor took leave of me with his blue eyes humid with emotion and kissed me on the lips without permission. I said nothing. Stolen kisses are without responsibility on either side—and it was the end of the Season.



Milan



PARIS seemed almost English in comparison with Marseilles. How I missed the southern accent, the sunshine and the charm of the porters! But to return home was always an event, and this time it became more so, when Mamma handed me a letter in a strange writing and on opening it I read that the Director and the conductor of the Scala Opera House in Milan were in Paris and wished to see me to discuss an engagement. I was overcome and could hardly believe my eyes. The greatest opera house in the world and they wanted me. I could never live up to it. I would refuse and tell them I was engaged somewhere else.

I gave Mamma the letter without a word and went to my room and sat looking at nothing in particular until I heard her intelligent little feet coming towards the door. She was wearing a halo of smiles and took me in her arms, saying: "My darling, this is the greatest vindication of all you have been through. What an honour, and it is only your fourth Season."

"I can't accept it," I cried.

"But you must, and if you do I will come with you."

She would not allow me to argue, and even Papa left his book for once and patted me on the head, saying: "*Bravo, mon enfant!*" I could not disappoint them and decided to see the Directors and leave the issue to fate.

The day they were coming, I lay in bed most of the



MARGUERITE D'ALVAREZ

From a photograph by Carl van Vechten



CHILDHOOD
AND
ADOLESCENCE





Marie -

June 14 1913.

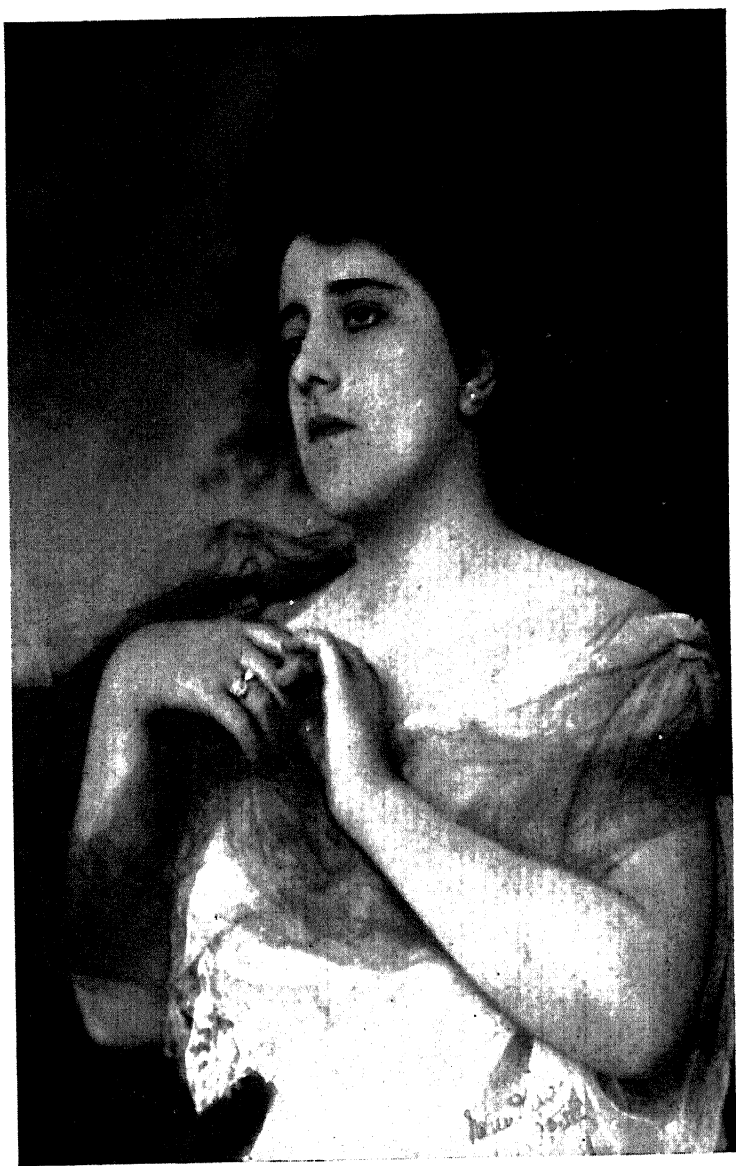
MARIE



SUZIE



OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN IN 1909

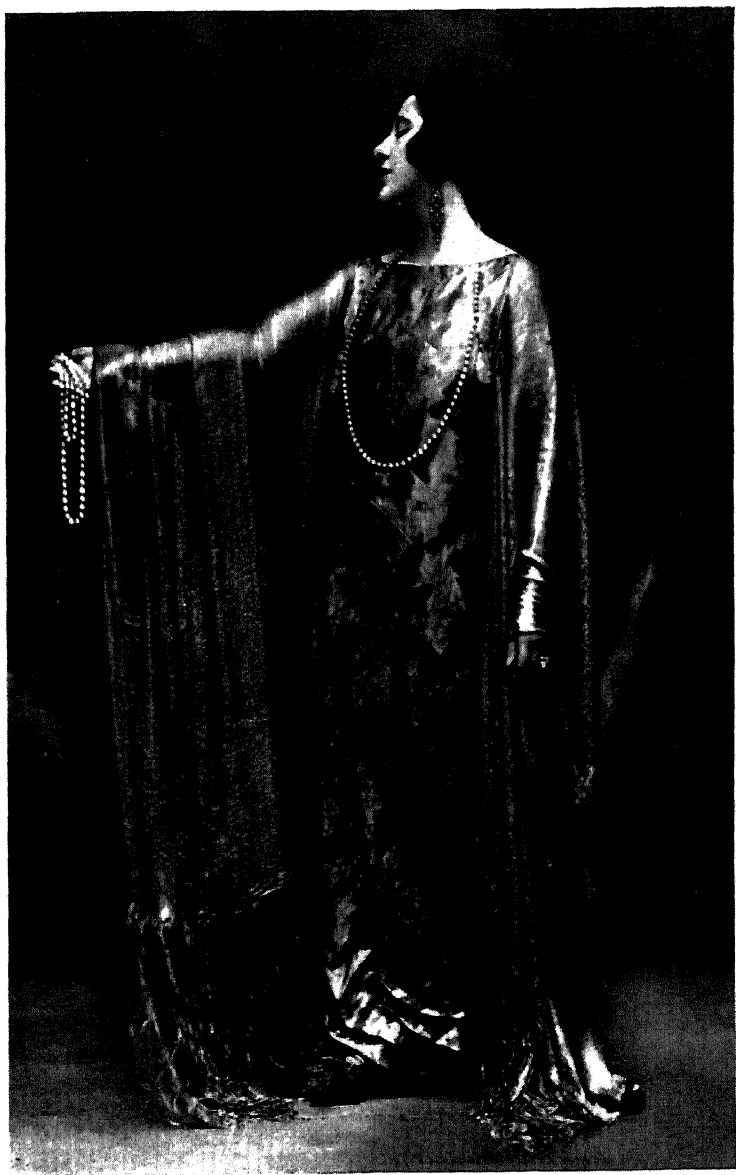


ABOUT 1909



BEN

THE CONCERT SINGER





1929

From a photograph by Cecil Beaton

morning, alternately praying and inhaling Friar's Balsam, which has an ecclesiastical perfume that, I felt, went well with prayer. Then I practised exercises with feverish enthusiasm in case I should have to sing. I asked Mamma to be with me to meet them, but she refused, saying I should be alone.

The doorbell rang and they were shown into the room. The Director, Mingardi, was unsympathetic and very reserved, and he wore such thick glasses I felt I was looking at him through a dim corridor. Serafin, the conductor, had delightful blue eyes and was a little lame. They told me first of the reputation I had made in America and the glowing accounts they had received about my art. Then they hesitated and became embarrassed. There was something else, they said, a question they must ask me, and they added: "We promise that your answer shall not go beyond these walls."

It sounded horribly sinister. "What is the question?" I asked, my heart pounding.

They had heard, they said haltingly, from the Manhattan that I had the habit of taking little white pills, that at times made me—well—unreliable. They must know—they hesitated again—were those pills a—a drug?

Without a word I got up, rang the bell and Lucy appeared: "Bring me my handbag, please," I said to her.

"I always carry those pills, gentlemen," I said as we waited. "I will show them to you."

The bag was brought and I took out—my saccharine. The visitors' faces were a study.

"I can give you the addresses of my other Directors, in case you want to find out more of my secret vices," I said—and burst out laughing. They laughed too, but not so heartily.

The interview ended with their insisting that I should sign a contract with them for the Scala before they left Paris, and follow them immediately to Milan for rehearsals. I said

I must consult my agent and would let them know my decision—but we all knew what it would be.

When I told Mamma the story of the saccharine, she was horrified and exclaimed: "Give up this career that is so full of treachery and cruelty. Marry Francisco and have a happy, normal life. It's not too late: he still loves you."

I tried to make her understand that love of my art, in spite of the suffering it brought, meant everything to me, and only if I loved with all my heart could I accept the difficulties of marriage. I would have been so happy to have had a home, a husband and children of my own, but a poetic, critical mind is always seeking the romance that will never become a habit, and the sensuousness that is more important than sensuality.

Next day I telephoned Monsieur Perez. Before I could tell him of the Milan offer, he reopened his plea on behalf of Hammerstein and said he had heard that he was going to build a great opera house in London and was anxious to do great things for me, if only I would be reasonable.

I answered: "Mr. Perez, you did not protect me in my first contract with Mr. Hammerstein and I will not make another. Now I have an offer from the greatest opera house in the world, the Scala"—I heard him gasp—"but I have God to thank for it, not you!"

In the end I promised to pay him his commission on the Milan engagement, if I accepted it. In some strange way I was fond of him, for as well as his French shrewdness he had a lovable Jewish side to his nature.

Then I had to make my decision—should I say yes or no to the Scala offer? I lay in my room and listened to my two voices and in the end the one that said yes won the day. I told my parents, and even Papa seemed delighted, though now, one felt, nothing mattered very much to him, and Mamma promised to join me in Milan very soon. The contract was signed. More packing—and the departure came.

I had been advised to stay at the Hôtel de Milan and went there. It was shabbily sympathetic, with wonderful food, but so noisy that I felt the carriages and their straw-stuffed horses were running over my pillow. I knew no Italian, and though it is so like Spanish I felt less at home in it mentally, and it was not until the day before the first rehearsal that I managed to learn the Italian score.

At the Opera House everything was beautifully done and everyone was smiling and helpful. They all seemed to speak a little French, which was comforting. Serafin on the rostrum was so vital and sensitive that it was exciting to sing for him. When anything pleased him, a smile crossed his face like a great sun passing over a ship on the ocean. The tenor had an enormous voice and a short body. The baritone was irresistibly handsome: I was disappointed he was not the tenor and so was he, I think. The opera was *Carmen*. I was told someone would teach me the Spanish dance for the ballet, but I said I would first do it alone and see how they liked it. Taking off my hat and coat, I began to improvise, as I had always longed to do, with the orchestra, and accompanied myself with the castanets. I saw reluctant approval on the faces of the dancers; and when I ended the chorus applauded. The male dancer was charming and said he found me interesting to dance with, and I thought, as I had on that far-away evening with Marguerite Aubert, how much easier it was for me to dance than to sing.

I was very happy during rehearsals and looked forward to the opening night. One day, as it approached, the hotel porter telephoned up to my room and said two gentlemen, whose names I did not know, wished to see me.

"Do they seem all right?"

"Oh yes," came the reply; "they always see the singers before their first appearance."

"Show them up then," I answered.

I waited and two men appeared, both equally suave and sinister-looking.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" I asked, as they stood silently watching me.

"*Signorina*," they answered in pigeon French, "we are the leaders of the *claque*. If you wish to have a success for your *début*, we must begin the applause for you and keep it going. All artists make use of us. We receive valuable gifts from them as well as money, and we would like to know how much you are prepared to pay us for our services."

I was almost speechless, but I managed to answer: "Gentlemen, applause must be deserved: I could never pay for it. I thank you for your offer, but I shall do my best and the audience alone must be the judge."

They protested volubly and tried to explain the dangers of independence in an opera house, but I stood my ground and showed them politely but firmly to the door. They left behind a slimy, menacing atmosphere that frightened me: the sunny room seemed suddenly hung in *crêpe*.

The next day, a telegram came from Mamma announcing her arrival. I was overjoyed in one way, but for the first time in my life wished I could be alone. Since the visit of the gentlemen of the *claque*, I had had a gnawing fear about the first night that I could not explain.

When she came, she did not look her usual self and seemed languid. I felt something in her had changed, and this anxiety drove all others from my mind. She told me that Marie and her two boys and their dog were going to Paris to look after Papa and she could stay with me as long as I wished. The mention of the dog made me tremble for the safety of the treasures I had left behind, and I suggested she should ask the proprietor of the apartment if dogs were allowed. But when she answered: "If they do not have the dog, they will not come at all and I shall have to return," I said no more.

She decided not to come to my *début*, as she hated first

nights and said truly that artists are never their real selves until judgment has been passed, but artists have so many selves, which is their real one? I have never known which is my own favourite, it depends entirely on my mood.

By the time the first night came, I had almost forgotten the danger of the claque, but as I drove to the Opera House in an open carriage on that eventful night, suddenly I received right in the middle of my cheek, thrown by an unseen hand, a bouquet of fresh manure. The coachman and I looked at each other in horror and amazement. Trying to console me, he said: "Perhaps it is for luck, *Signorina*," but I could not accept such a Latin interpretation.

At the Opera House I told no one of the incident and went to my dressing-room silently with the quietness that heralds the storm. The Director and Serafin and a few of the artists came to wish me luck. They asked me how I felt and I answered: "At the end of the performance I shall be able to say."

The orchestra tuning up changed my fear into joy. Putting my castanets on my fingers, I began to rehearse my dance and felt as exhilarated as though I had drunk wine. The call-boy came to fetch me and led me towards the stage, holding the tips of my fingers so that I should not trip over the entrails of the electric lights. The ballet dancers and the stage-hands stared at me as I passed, and I saw their approval or disapproval quite plainly in their eyes. I had to descend a flight of steps for my entrance on to the vast stage, and stage steps have always a terror until one knows them thoroughly. I had the sudden idea of leaning on the shoulder of one of the chorus men, as though in rapt conversation, as I came down them and then ran down the last few alone.

The beautiful theatre was packed to the roof and I was thankful I had a few seconds in which to get my breath before beginning "*Quand je vous aimerai*." At first all went well, but after the Habanera mixed with the great applause came another sound that grew louder and almost drowned

it—hisses! The claque were doing their work. I stood utterly bewildered, bowed, left the stage, rushed to my dressing-room and locked the door. I wanted to die and thanked God that Mamma was not in the audience. How could I bear it? What would happen if I refused to go on again?

The Director and Serafin knocked on the door and I had to admit them. They told me I must not be upset, that this happened to all foreign artists. I had sung splendidly, they said, and must put everything I had into the rest of the performance and I would triumph in the end. I could not agree but was so angry as well as miserable that I determined to put up a fight, even if it were the last appearance of my career.

I loved my next aria, the Seguidilla, with its flirtatious acting, the difficult rhythm, which makes it the criterion by which the audience waits to judge you, and the top B natural at the end which few contraltos ever try. My rage seemed infectious, and the scene with the girls from the tobacco factory was so realistic that they tore my blouse as we fought together. It stimulated me so much that I forgot everything, and when I sang the aria and took the top B and held it, the greater part of the audience screamed with enthusiasm and a few faint hisses were drowned in the hubbub and then ceased completely. I had to bow many times but felt no joy, only quite ill from the reaction. The dance stimulated me still more; it was in my blood, and even to-day when I am sad I dance. Montesanto, the baritone, was irresistible as the toreador and had told me that the way I listened to his singing helped him as no other singer had ever done. Perhaps it was the memory of another toreador, so different and more virile, that made my interest so real.

At the end of the evening the applause was deafening. After the performance, the Director and Serafin came to my dressing-room and said: "What did we tell you? A triumph!" I did not wait to talk to any of the audience, who were

crowding behind them, but explained that my mother was not well and I must return to her. She was lying awake, waiting for me. I did not tell her all that had happened and only spoke of the ultimate triumph, but I said that I was exhausted and must call a doctor the next day to give me a nerve-tonic. I really wanted him to see her, for I could feel within myself that there was something wrong and the horrors of the evening seemed infinitesimal in comparison with my anxiety about her.

The next morning Serafin introduced me to his doctor, who proved charming. I begged Mamma to let him examine her just for my sake, and she agreed reluctantly. I followed the expression of his eyes and knew that something was wrong. He said it was a recurrence of the heart trouble that she had had when I was a little girl and used to be called to her from the convent, because when I put my hand on the pain it seemed to disappear. I only prayed that I still had that mystic power: nothing mattered but to get her well. I knew now that she had joined me in Italy because she needed me and I would have given my life for her so willingly. As for my own nervous state, the doctor told me that it was perfectly natural after the ordeal of the night before, and he congratulated me on my stoicism and said he had seen many great artists crumble and become hysterical in the same conditions. Nevertheless, something had happened to me from the shock. I developed a neurasthenia that kept me awake most of the night in humid terror, and all the success which followed that famous opening night could not obliterate the memory of the hisses, the vengeance and the throwing of the manure. And from that day I was forced to wear a horrible corset, almost like a strait jacket, or I could not cross that huge stage without losing my breath or give what was expected from me. How potent is the influence of the mind! Every sickness surely begins within it, and the body only reacts to its hidden message.

The Season at the Scala was a short one. Very soon after my first appearance the Director approached me about a second contract, but I evaded the question as tactfully as I could, saying my plans were uncertain and I might have to leave Italy, but please God would return there later. I did not add that I longed to get away, if I could find another engagement.

Just before the end of the Season, fate as always intervened. One day I received a visit from Henry Russell, the brother of Landon Ronald and Director of the Boston Opera House, built by the millionaire Mr. Jordan with unbounded generosity and good taste, and the most artistically managed of all American opera houses. Russell was a man of small stature and great charm, with a flair for finding great artists—always at a reduced fee. He told me that he had admired my performance but I must diet—my proportions were too Latin for anything but character parts in America and impossible for a Carmen. He would, however, offer me the Mother in *The Jewels of the Madonna* to test the reactions of the Boston audiences, and if they accepted me I would be given other rôles later. I knew this was an offer I should accept, though there was again the dread of going so far away from home. But Mamma's health was improving remarkably under the care of the intelligent Italian doctor—it would not be a long engagement—and I agreed to go.

Almost at the same time as this important interview, out of the blue came a letter with the Paris postmark from Mr. Hammerstein. My heart sank as I opened it and a cloud came over the Italian sun. What new accusations, what fresh libels would I have to face? But, to my amazement, it was to beg my forgiveness, to promise amendment and to offer me an engagement as principal contralto in the opera house he was building in London, of which Perez had spoken. And as an added attraction he suggested that he might meet Marie's husband, Robert Le Butt, with a view to giving him

a position on the business side. My first instinct was to refuse most definitely—then I wavered. I was longing to sing in England, my own country, in London above all, and surely I would be more protected there, particularly if I had Bobby to support me. And I would be close to Mamma, about whom I was still anxious in my heart, and it would give me a certain engagement after the Boston Opera House. At last after hours of indecision I answered the letter. I told Mr. Hammerstein I would meet him in Paris to discuss the matter, but was determined that only if I had a cast-iron contract, on a strictly impersonal basis, would I consider returning to him.

When the moment came to leave Milan, I was sad, in spite of all the unhappiness I had felt there, for I loved—and still love—Italy and the Italians with their musical voices, their warm natures and devoted home-lives. They have the thriftiness without the selfishness of the French and can make a master-piece of tailoring out of an old skirt, even if they have never learned to sew. The men are wonderful instinctive lovers, and that is why middle-aged Anglo-Saxon women so often find refuge in their young arms, their tenderness giving consolation to their weary fading beauty. In later years on Lake Como I met such a couple, between whom the difference in age was fantastic. Their liaison was an incestuous maternity, but everything becomes possible under those southern skies among the perfumed trees and flowers, the only sound in the still air the plashing of gentle oars in the sky-blue water.

We returned to Paris calmly. It was lovely to be in the apartment once more. Lucy had kept it in beautiful order, though the provision cupboard looked like a derelict cemetery and she had certainly entertained quite a little on her own while we were away.

I went at once to a French lawyer, jovial and diplomatic,

and explained the Hammerstein situation to him. Being like all Frenchmen understanding about love in all its forms, he smiled and said: "Leave everything to me." Then I had a short meeting with Mr. Hammerstein himself and said in as businesslike a way as I could that we must go to the lawyer's office and discuss the proposed London contract. He replied that first he wanted me to meet his daughter Stella, who had come over from New York especially to see me. As I had never met her, I was curious to know what this portended and invited her to the apartment.

When she came she was like a breeze of unadulterated New York, with red hair, a beautiful figure and a gay approach. Before I could open my mouth, she said laughingly: "I've come to do the talking, D'Alvarez." Then she told me that her "Poppa" had brought her over to be his ambassador with me and had promised her a fur coat if she were successful.

"Successful in what?" I asked—and she announced brightly that he was divorcing his wife and was determined afterwards to marry me.

I nearly collapsed and asked if she had any idea of what "Poppa" had put me through in New York. She answered evasively and said that London would be a peace-offering.

"I doubt it," I answered, "and you can put this marriage madness right out of his head."

Nevertheless, we parted good friends and I asked her to come with her father and me when we went to the lawyer's. They called for me in a big car and, as I got in, Stella gave me a delicious wink. We drove in almost complete silence. I introduced the lawyer and the contract was produced. I read it carefully this time and demanded that several clauses about my personal freedom should be put in. Hammerstein went white with rage and said they were undignified and unnecessary, but I was firm. Stella intervened.


"I'll be there to see Poppa keeps his word."

"I want it on paper—and signed," I answered.

And in the end the clauses were inserted and we both signed, my Gemini voices arguing violently against each other as I wrote my name.



Boston—Chicago

 DURING the rest of my stay in Paris I felt a sadness I could not explain. Mamma did not seem so well and we were both anxious about Papa's health. I wished I had not accepted the Boston engagement and left again for America with a heavy heart.

It was, however, a great experience to work at the Boston Opera House. Everything was done to achieve perfection. There were endless rehearsals and famous artists—Muratore, Dalmorès, Ferrari Fontana, Mary Garden, Maggie Teyte, Madame Edwina and other great singers of the world. We always met first socially at the Jordans', which made it all much easier. André Caplet was one of the most interesting of the many conductors: he was simple and intriguing, intelligence spurted from his eyes, and it was thrilling to sing under him. We rehearsed alone together and the next day my perfume was detected by the nostrils of his jealous mistress—how strong were the perfumes then!—and he begged me not to wear it any more at rehearsals. Moranzoni was another charming and human conductor: his calm was extraordinary for an Italian, and whenever he made a correction it was done with humour and tact.

The Season opened with *The Jewels of the Madonna*, with Madame Edwina and Vanni Marcoux. Edwina was very gifted and we became great friends. Had she not been so interested in Society and its exhausting routine, I feel she would have been a finer artist.

I was very successful as the Mother and was afterwards given other rôles, singing three times a week. The critics were kind and helpful to me, particularly Philip Hale, who was instrumental in making my name known throughout America. His criticisms were analytical to the point of surgery but were always brilliantly constructive and I learned much from him, as I also did from Pitts Sanborn, the New York critic, who was more romantic in his approach.

After the Boston Season I was offered and accepted a short engagement at the Chicago Opera House. I loved Chicago, as I think do all artists—the windy city, so evil and interesting, cleansed, I felt, by its mysterious lake and daily hurricanes. It is the rendezvous of most of the American gangsters, and perhaps those winds also help to purify their torpid minds. The lake has been the cemetery of many of their victims, but unlike the sea with her tides, she does not give up her dead. The Congress Hotel, where all the artists stay, was like a Conservatory of Music. Trills and exercises came from every room, and once I was amazed to hear Madame Galli-Curci repeating a phrase ten times to make it perfect: I stood outside her suite in admiration of her tenacity. To me she was perhaps the greatest singer of her type, and she dressed so perfectly and had such grace that one forgot that she lacked beauty. I spoke to her only once, and she was not warm towards me. Of the Opera House itself I shall write more, when I tell of my second engagement there.

asked if I would mind climbing the steep ladder that was the only way into it. He said that through the top of the windows you could see the tips of the sails of the ships below and promised to open the windows wide for me. It sounded fascinating and of course I said I would go. He boasted that he was an excellent cook and asked what I would like to eat.

"Buy some lilacs," I answered.

"But you can't eat those."

"No, but I wish I could."

Climbing up to the lighthouse was the most acrobatic performance I have ever given, but when at last I reached the top rung of the ladder, a young and delicate mauve lilac tree was waiting with the artist to greet me. His paintings were round the walls, and the table was beautifully set; it was so low we had to sit on cushions on the floor. How enchanting to live in so primitive a way! My host told me that when the storms came the lighthouse swayed in their grip like a dancer and he hoped I would come back in the winter to witness them. The food was excellent and the wines he had chosen proved his knowledge and taste, but I was *distracte* and he asked me why. I could not tell him I was thinking of another port, which had left a constant bruise in my heart, and I was silent. He tried to make me talk of myself, then told me he had been attracted by me from the first moment he had looked into my eyes. I asked him not to say any more; it would be taking advantage of the difficult ladder, for I could not leave without his helping me down. "I never want you to leave," he cried. I was touched by his ardour, the evening had charmed me, and the scent of the lilac was more intoxicating than the wine.

"I must go now but I will come back another time—and perhaps stay," I said.

He looked as disappointed as a small boy, and taking his head in my hands I kissed him on the forehead. He opened

the door that the wind had jammed and we climbed down together. Then we walked through the shadowy port with its tarry ropes and bales, on which the fishermen slept, waiting for the tide to come in, when they could pull out in their smacks to sea.

When I got back to the hotel it was very late, I was exhausted and felt foolish at having left the lighthouse. There were letters from home waiting for me. I opened Mamma's first. She wrote that I must not be too alarmed but Papa was very ill. Marie's wonderful Miss Walker, who looked after her boys, was nursing him with her bright efficiency, he had been just as ill before and they were all praying for the best. I could read between the lines and knew that she did not want to disturb me in my work. My first impulse was to rush home immediately, but I could not break my contract, and in those days I had a morbid horror of death that made me too cowardly to face it. Two days later I had a telegram to say that the end had come, but my mother did not wish me to return. She understood that this fear of death was an illness I could not control and I should not be asked to attempt it.

When I told the young painter of my sorrow, his affection and tenderness were moving. I became very attached to him and spent all my spare time with him. He painted me lying on the bed in the lighthouse under the lilac-tree, and I wish I had that picture now. I shall never forget that delightful vignette in my life, and even to-day the scent of lilac carries me back in spirit to the lighthouse and those enchanted hours.



London



AFTER the Season at Le Havre I returned to Worthing. There was a poignant blank with Papa no longer sitting in his favourite corner, reading his books or playing his beloved cards. I hardly dared mention him to my mother. A great love had ended: both her lover and her child had left her. She was overcome with unhappiness and looked very frail herself. I longed to take her away and travel with her, but I had to start rehearsals at the London Opera House. I took a flat for us both in Pelham Street and Marie lent us her wonderful manservant, who was both man and woman, but only in the practical sense, as he was very much married. His wife was indolent and selfish and only made the beds and drank cups of tea.

It was strange and wonderful to be back in London and I longed ardently to make good there. The London Opera House in Kingsway—it is now the Stoll Theatre—was being completed with American rapidity. Outside on the very top was a large sculptured head, taken from one of my photographs—Hammerstein afterwards had it removed—and many of the plaster casts round the inside were also supposed to be of me. The same stage managers and most of the staff had been brought from the Manhattan, and to see them again was like re-dreaming a bad dream. Bobby had been appointed house manager and Hammerstein consulted him about almost everything. He had taken a great fancy to him

and Marie, and they were inclined to take his side in our disputes, which did not help me. I avoided personal meetings with him as much as possible and concentrated on rehearsals.

My first two parts were to be the Queen in Massenet's *Herodiadé* and the Mother in *Louise*, but I had not been told in which I would make my début nor had the opening opera been announced. To appear on the opening night of the Opera House was all-important, and finally I questioned Mr. Hammerstein himself. He asked me to come to his office and immediately raised the subject of his divorce and our marriage: the whole conversation went up in smoke. At last I said in desperation: "I cannot marry you or anyone. I was married in Brussels."

He seemed to crumble in his chair for a moment, but quickly recovered and shouted: "Then your contract is invalid. You signed as an unmarried woman."

I felt sunk and could only confess that I had lied. He was triumphant but a suspicion remained in his mind, and later he actually sent one of his satellites to Brussels to try and trace a marriage licence. When he could not do so, the wretched man, afraid to return empty-handed, had one forged and gave it to Hammerstein. Then, when he found it was to be used against me, in a panic he set fire to the desk in which it was kept and it was destroyed.

After that unfortunate interview, I was not allowed to appear on the Opera House's opening night. Miss Felice Lynne was given that honour and all the publicity and glory that had been promised to me. She had a great and deserved success.

My first appearance was as the Mother in *Louise* and was quite unheralded. I was actually relieved to be the simple artist and not a publicised star and managed to make an impression as a character actress as well as a dramatic singer. One of the audience wrote to me later that, apart from my voice, he would never forget the way in which I had cut the

loaf, using my stomach as the bread-board. After this success Hammerstein was obliged to use me further, and I sang Herodiadé and several other rôles.

Towards the end of the Season, Stella came to me again as an ambassador. She told me her father's divorce was through and asked if my decision not to marry him was unchanged. "Irrevocably," I answered. Then she said that an American woman, who had been in love with him for years, was coming to England and she was going to try and make him see reason and marry her. I begged her to do so, as, in spite of everything, I wished him the happiness he could never find through me.

"Tell him that yourself," she urged.

"I will," I answered.

It was a painful interview. Reproaches were heaped on my head. I was blamed for everything, even for the financial failure of the opera season, and nothing I could say would change his bitterness. He looked very old and lonely, and now that I was to be free I could feel only pity. Towards the end I heard him mutter to himself: "I shouldn't have done this to Rosy" (his wife, who died soon afterwards)—and my heart ached for him.

One night before the end of the Opera House Season, a shy North-countryman with a midshipman's blue eyes and an adventurous spirit came to visit me: his name was Lionel Powell. He asked me if I would like to sing for him at a concert at the Albert Hall. I had never been inside that vast building and said I would like to visit it before deciding. He seemed amused and said he would give me tickets to hear Madame Melba sing there. When he had gone, Mamma remonstrated with me for not having jumped at his offer, and I tried to explain certain fears I had about the shape of halls and the importance of whether they were sympathetic or not.

The Albert Hall frightened me with its size and lugubrious echo, and I was sorry I had gone. It was one of Madame Melba's many goodbyes and, though I know I am one of the few, I was not greatly impressed by her. She had a choir-boy's voice and such purity of tone did not give me an emotional reaction, nor did I feel her to be an artist. To her one word was like another, she was in love with none of them. I came away ungrateful and unmoved and doubtful if I could ever sing in that gloomy building.

Before I had given Mr. Powell my answer, a telephone message came from Madame Edwina, asking me to go and see her about something of great importance. I was delighted to meet her once more: she was always so *chic* and refreshingly interested in life and people, even in me whom she did not begin to understand. I understood her perfectly and admired her for her pluck and great maternity.

When I saw her she told me she had spoken to Mr. Higgins, the Director of Covent Garden, about my performances in America and he would offer me a contract for two or three performances of Amneris in *Aïda* in his wonderful opera house. To sing at Covent Garden—the goal of all my ambitions! My excitement knew no bounds and I could hardly wait until the next day, when I went to see Mr. Higgins. He was a very good-looking, shrewd, well-bred man who spoke in whispers, having had his vocal cords cut by some accident. It was exhausting in a way to be with him, as he was a great raconteur and one had to strain one's ears not to lose any of his jokes. His charm was so devastating that even when discussing contracts he always got the best of the argument. But I knew the great honour it was to sing in his opera house, and I signed whatever he wanted.

When Lionel Powell telephoned for my decision about the Albert Hall concert he was taken aback when I told him I was going to appear at Covent Garden. I think he was frightened I was going to ask him for more money, but it

never entered my head. I accepted the concert, which took place before my Covent Garden début.

It was a new experience to be alone on a platform, and one felt perhaps a more intellectual joy than in opera. In that enormous hall I felt that I was singing to the whole world, and I was so inspired that I even forgot the argumentative echo. To sing without the disguise of make-up or costume was however an ordeal. I wore a beautiful dress made to my own design, of dull moonlight sequins bordered with black fox: I love originality and simplicity of design and long trains that retain the attention of the audience when one has almost left the stage.

Frederick Kiddle was my accompanist. He was a profound musician with the most constructive personality and an equable temperament. He jumped my hurdles without asking why, and though he thought I was eccentric, as do many others, he accepted me with affection. I regret so much that he died before my return to England after the last war: I wanted to thank him once again for his friendship and understanding. Mr. Liddle as well as Mr. Kiddle (this is not meant for a rhyme) also played for me occasionally during this time. He also was a great accompanist, a charming Scotsman, very reserved and without Kiddle's sense of humour.

The audience that day in the Albert Hall was wonderful, listening without a sneeze or cough, which is a great tribute from the English public. After the concert, the green-room was crowded with enthusiastic people I hardly knew, among them Queen Amélie of Portugal and her son, the ex-King, many artists and composers and a few strange, down-at-heel people with interesting personalities, and large books for me to sign. Lionel Powell seemed very happy at the response and said he would talk to me about more concerts. He was a little reserved but I knew that was his business sense.

Daniel Mayer, the French impresario, had once told me,

after an audition with him, that I was only a singer for opera and could never achieve the calm and poise of a concert singer. He was in the Albert Hall audience that day and came round afterwards to say with great warmth that he regretted his previous lack of vision. But, he added, I had not yet tried a recital and that was the greatest test. "I will try one," I answered, and he offered me his services, but I refused them politely: I would need a manager who believed in me. In all true artists is a doubt of themselves: only dilettanti have complete assurance and no fear, for they do not possess the sacred fire.

Rehearsals at Covent Garden, when they began, were more than interesting. The English restraint almost persuaded the Latin artists to abandon gesticulation and argument. It was a wonderful cast. Emmy Destinn played Aïda; Martinelli, Radames; Dinh Gilly, Amonasro; Gustave Huberdeau, Ramfis; Murray Davey, the King. The conductor was Ettore Panizza.

Emmy Destinn was a *grande dame* and a great singer but not a great actress. I admired her school of singing tremendously and wondered why her acting was so different: she was so conventional on the stage and completely unconventional off it. She had studied to be a doctor and perhaps could not abandon that special type of mind. She loved life and food, was an excellent cook, and had a short marriage and a lovely child by the great Italian tenor Ferrari Fontana. She was charming to me, and I was very touched by the interest she took in all I did. She would listen in the wings when I was singing and begged me not to give so much of myself as it was exhausting to the voice. I told her I could not help it, and she said: "But you must try it. This is a divine fire that must burn slowly and forever." I asked her to tell me what she liked and disliked in what I did, and she answered with her magnanimous smile: "I too am an artist and am not here

to judge, only to enjoy." On my début she gave me the most beautiful ring, which I have to this day. I loved her and wished all prima donnas could be as kind.

Martinelli looked like a handsome ram in a biblical picture: he had an eternal smile and was very lovable, but I did not admire his way of singing. It was so strained I felt his vocal cords must be made of steel and he swung on them like a fox-terrier on a bone.

I have always found Amneris the most difficult rôle in the repertoire of contraltos, as high in tessitura as Aïda and very dramatic, which makes it a pitfall vocally unless one has great restraint and control of one's emotions, and that was never easy for me. I was afraid of it and of the first night. This was on June 25th, 1914.

When it came with its most elegant audience in the world, it was a triumph for everyone and I could feel proud that I had been able to succeed in such a Company on such an occasion. It was the climax of all I had ever dreamed in my student days in Brussels—the dream that I had hardly dared to hope could ever come true. I was grateful as well as proud, yet not truly happy, though why I could not tell; certainly I was deeply anxious about Mamma's health, which had deteriorated sadly since my father's death, but it seemed an even more fundamental sadness.

I made two further appearances as Amneris, on July 1st when Aïda was sung by Rosa Raisa, Amonasro by Francesco Cigada, Ramfis by Adamo Didur and the King by Huberdeau, and on July 17th when Destinn returned as Aïda and Dinh Gilly as Amonasro and there was a new Radames in the person of Paul Franz. Then came August 4th and like a thunderbolt from a blue sky the declaration of war. I knew then why I had had that sense of doom, for even in those days I felt that war could never lead to peace: it is a *cul de sac* of frustration, hate and despair.

We were all in a state of dilemma but believed like so

many others that it could only last a few weeks. My brothers-in-law both joined up at once, and we decided that the women of the family must live together and try to be as helpful as they could. Mamma's mews house became a rendezvous for many intelligent, interesting people, though she herself was far from well. She found it hard to move now, and the sound of her beautiful footsteps was getting rarer. I consulted every doctor but there was no cure for that disastrous illness, rheumatoid arthritis. She never spoke of the pain she suffered, but there was a mute on her vivacious nature. As usual, she was full of ideas and even wrote to Lloyd George, telling him that soups were the most important things in a soldier's diet and that in France, though the *poilus* were not tall, they were very strong and this was due to the chickens' feet and veal-bones that were the foundation of their mainstay, the *poilus'* soup. He answered her in a charming letter, saying that her advice would be followed, and she was happy. She said she felt that in her last incarnation she must have been a *cantinière*, and she wished she were a man to offer her life to the cause.

The months dragged on and hopes of a quick peace faded. Work for me was at a standstill, but there were many charity concerts and I had even to employ a secretary to answer the demands on my time. It was a joy to be able to help and give, through one's voice, some of the consolation that was so urgently needed in those sad days.

Baron Frédéric d'Erlanger was a delightful composer, and at his request I sang many of his songs; they were all beautiful and the *Jeanne d'Arc* really dramatic. Had he not been a rich man, I am sure he would have made a great name in the world of music.

In spite of all the misery, people retained their courage, and music as always was a solace. At the Queen's Hall Mr. William Boosey put on the Promenade Concerts, and he

wrote and asked me to meet him. I went to his luxurious office in Bond Street, and he greeted me with an overwhelming, genial smile: I liked him from that first moment. His daughter too was charming and I found in them real friends and a protection, which was a rare and valuable change in my career. He arranged for me to sing at several of his concerts, where many of the greatest artists, including Emma Calvé, also appeared. The conductor was that most enchanting of all conductors, Sir Henry Wood. He was a simple, intelligent man, modest and jovial, and the hardest worker one could possibly meet. He managed to be erudite in his work and constructive towards the artist he was conducting. Like a lover, he breathed one's phrases with one and looked anxiously to see if one was at ease with his tempo. To sing Bach under his guidance was a prayer, and made me feel so elevated that I thought God might one day pull me up through a hole in the roof to Heaven just as I was, without making me experience the agonies of death.

Through these concerts I built up a loyal and loving English following, who, when I went away in later years, were always waiting to welcome me on my return. I appreciated—and still appreciate—their affection more than I can say. I adopted the songs I sang as my own and was reproached by a famous critic in *The Times* for daring to make bad music appear interesting, but there was always something in them that appealed to me or I could not have sung them, and although I was paid by firms to make their songs a success, if I had not felt beauty in them, much as I needed the money I could not have accepted it.

Later Mr. Boosey arranged for me a tour with orchestra all through the Midlands, and I was enchanted by the intelligence of provincial audiences. They were wonderful to sing to, looking rarely at their programmes and watching one's every movement. Besides their musicianship, I remember most the warmth of their applause, the shocking beds in

their hotels, the draughts, and the monotony of their food—yet they are a happy people, much gayer than those in the south. I lived very much on my own and felt lonely and depressed, haunted by the anxiety of Mamma's illness.

When the tour finished, I came back to London for two days and then crossed to Ireland for a tour arranged by Lionel Powell. The sea-voyage to America seemed like crossing a pond in comparison and I was horribly ill, but nevertheless had to sing on arrival in Dublin and be composed and smiling as I walked on to the platform and faced those warm-hearted people, who stood up and cheered before I even opened my mouth. I sang in several other Irish cities, but Dublin was nearest to my heart. On my return I had a charming letter from one of the teachers in the College here. She told me she had taught me in my Liverpool convent days and remembered many eccentric things I had done. Once, she wrote, when the Reverend Mother asked me why I wore a little gold-and-enamel ring on the third finger of my left hand, I answered: "I am engaged to God." She said I had often been punished for things I had not done, for I would shoulder responsibility for the guilty girls.

Another of my correspondents was a miner in Chester, who continually wrote me wonderful letters in Shakespearean English, full of poetry and imagination: I feel I should have made an effort to meet him and to help him in some way, but there is so little spare time in an artist's career.

Encouraged by my success at the Promenade Concerts, I gave a series of recitals—the acid test of which Daniel Mayer had spoken—at the Aeolian Hall in Bond Street, with its unique atmosphere, a blend of the impersonality of a concert hall and the intimacy of one's own home. There I sang programmes of my most treasured composers—Bach, Debussy, Ravel, René Baton, Chausson, César Franck, De Falla,

Granados, Pedrell—mixed with requests for their special favourites from my audiences, who were varied, colourful, and all intelligent music-lovers. King Manôel of Portugal was always in the front row and would send his aide-de-camp with little papers, asking me to give his favourite encores. He was very musical but somehow never thought of engaging artists to sing for him.

In memory, of all my concerts those are the ones nearest my heart. I felt only warmth and appreciation surrounding me and could lose myself gloriously in my art. Perhaps I was over-dramatic for the rigid conventions of the concert platform, but I was always uncalculated, spontaneous and completely myself. The beautiful jewels that were given me, tucked without cards into the middle of big bouquets, I still treasure for the taste and delicacy of their givers, and the wonderful flowers, which were handed up in a long procession, were jewels of a different kind, which I shared next day with hospital patients.

I wore dresses designed for—and with—me by a young artist, Guy de Gérard, whom I first met as a boy of fourteen. I was having tea with his mother one day, when she showed me the sketch of a dress which she said her schoolboy son wanted her to have made, and she laughingly added: "Of course it's impossible: it's so eccentric." I thought it beautiful and asked to meet him. He was tall with bushy black hair and enormous brown eyes, and elated that I should admire his work. We became close friends, even playmates. His sense of humour was acute and he had intelligence and a generous heart. The clothes he designed for me made him quite famous, and he also did a poster head of me which was such a success that I used it on my programmes. Alas, he died tragically when very young, but not before he had been able to give his mother, to whom he was pathetically devoted, all that she desired.

One night, at the end of one of the Aeolian Hall recitals,

I was introduced in the artists' room to Firenza Montagu—a fateful meeting. She had a fugitive beauty and a rare personality that still remains, and she moved with an Italian grace that made me think of Dante's Beatrice crossing the bridge over the Arno. There was an immediate sympathy between us and she asked me to her home to meet her husband, Gerald. He was dark and very large and rather alarming at first sight, with—in those days—a fierce pirate's moustache, but when he smiled his inner kindness shone forth like a blessing: one knew one had found a friend, and fear vanished. Years later, when a certain manager owed me a great deal of money, I asked Gerald to meet him at my apartment. The manager came first, and when Gerald entered he blanched visibly, clutched the back of a chair and asked for a glass of water. I felt my money would pour forth as when Moses struck the rock, but, alas, Gerald smiled and the battle was lost. The manager revived, became almost truculent, and I never saw a penny.

The Montagus with their contrasted personalities had created two lovely children who held the essence of them both, and in the years that followed they all became my second family. I lived with them when I was in London and we had splendid holidays abroad together in the years between the wars.

During the same Aeolian Hall period, a quiet little creature slipped almost through a crack in the door into my life, to become, though I did not realise it then, one of its pillars. Her name was Eva Woolf. I was ill with Spanish influenza with a trained nurse looking after me by day, but the doctor said I must be watched all the time and Eva came as a friend, though she was crippled and not young, to be the night-light in my unconscious ramblings. Later she became my secretary, and her selfless love was one of the biggest things in my life. She was a born mother who never committed an indiscretion or said a mean word during all the years she lived with

me, though in a strange way she was jealous, without thinking she showed it, of the people whom I loved and who loved me. She died in 1947, and I still miss her sadly and thank her often in my heart for her unlimited devotion throughout the years.

These lasting friendships, that were to mean so much to me, were a wonderful, psychic gift from fate at the time when I was to need them most. For some months I had known subconsciously that I would have to face a loneliness almost too agonising to endure—and before long it came. The war drew to its close, and shortly after Armistice Day Mamma, having in her illness sung a few bars of the Marseillaise with pride and joy in her lovely eyes, said goodbye and left us.

It was the mutilation of the roots of my being. For a long time I died with her and it seemed as though I would never be able to sing again.



PART FOUR

The Wanderer





Madame D'Alvarez was taken fatally ill before she was able to revise *Part Four* of this book. She had planned to amplify it and add tributes to many artists and friends whom she had particularly admired and loved, and during her illness she asked that this note might be written to explain why it could not be done.



Australia—Tahiti—Honolulu



LOOKING back over the years that followed Mamma's death, I see them as pieces of broken mosaic, many-coloured and some of great beauty, but with no pattern formed, while running through the years before I see a golden cord, uniting them all like the rope that binds mountain-climbers, and leading in a steady progress from my childhood dreams to the peak of their coming true.

The link between Latin mothers and their children is hard for Anglo-Saxons to understand, for in Latin countries the family bond is infinitely tighter and less flexible. If I had had children of my own, I know I would have been an impossible mother, sacrificing everything for them, ruining them with excessive, uncritical love and hating anyone who dared breathe a word against them.

Without Mamma—though I see it only in to-day's perspective—I became like a rudderless ship without a guiding star. Of my voyaging through the later years I shall not give a complete story, only tell of the outstanding memories that remain.

Some months before the end of the war, I had been offered a tour in Australia by the Tate Brothers, a powerful association of shrewd, prosperous brothers, who owned all the theatres and concert halls "down under." I had said then that I did not think I could go so far away, and they had given me several weeks in which to decide.

When I was sunk in the despair and lethargy following Mamma's death, I was urged by my family and friends to accept the offer. They thought that the sea voyage and change of scene would restore me; they forgot that one's heart travels with one. I was utterly indifferent as to what I did, but to satisfy them I consented to go.

Mr. Boosey tried to persuade me to stay permanently in England, but I did not listen to him. How different my life would have been, had I done so! With my sisters and the Montagus always close, I might have had more illusion of "home" and perhaps more inner peace, but America was the magnet that constantly drew me, for apart from the vastness of its opportunities and the feverish competition that stimulates one's artistic glands, its climate charged with electricity gave me an impetus I could not find in the English air: it was the difference between a cocktail and a cup of tea.

On my voyage to Australia, I stopped in New York and gave a recital, arranged by Mr. Boosey, in Carnegie Hall. Every well-known singer I had met was in the audience and I had a triumph at the end of the evening. I opened my programme with that mystic song of César Franck beginning "God advances through the land and fields," and my suffering and loneliness were so intense that I was able to lose myself completely within it. The critic, Pitts Sanborn, afterwards wrote that, when I ended, he turned to see if God were really descending the aisle.

Later, at the suggestion of Margaret Anderson, part-founder of the interesting *Little Review*, I gave a concert in Greenwich Village. The stage was beautifully arranged with weird tropical plants, green against long red velvet curtains, and every writer and painter who lived in the Village, and those who were just artists in feeling, came to welcome me. It was a unique audience, who appreciated not only my voice but everything I had to offer in gesture, facial ex-

pression and the colouring of words. Their vitality and intelligence were inspiring, though artists *en masse* are a little frightening, with their beards and dishevelled hair, making them look like prehistoric men.

Daniel Mayer arranged the Australian tour in combination with the Tates. He was a great impresario, but unfortunately he did not do for me what he did for many of his artists. Consequently I made a great deal of money but was able to save very little. There were financial mysteries that only a chartered accountant could have tackled, and I sometimes felt completely lost.

I had no one to protect me and was too ill and unhappy to try and protect myself. Artists should be spared these indignities. They should be helped without patronage as they were in past centuries, in Russia for instance, where the great singers and dancers were engaged for exaggerated sums to perform at Court and in the houses of the great and were able to live in unbalanced luxury, well suited to their unpredictable natures. How I regret having refused to sing at the Opera House in Petrograd, but I had a bourgeois fear that anything might happen to one there, from being thrust into prison for no reason at all to being asked to sing naked on the stage.

I acquired these ideas from a young Russian prince I had known, a Georgian, with green eyes and a beige skin, so beautiful that the Czar felt he was unsuited to be in the Imperial Guard. He was asked to leave and came to learn English at Oxford: I often wondered how many English hearts he broke or cracked. Appointments or hours meant nothing to him, nor did my sister's immaculate tennis court, when I took him to stay with her. He could not understand its importance and played on it madly in pumps. The aged gardener, who I always felt had been built with the house, gave notice and his young assistant watered the garden with

his tears, for he loved the old man like a father. Genia, when he heard, laughed so heartily that the chandelier shook. What a singer he would have made, if one could have tamed him sufficiently! The only things he seemed really to love were his collection of emeralds, which he wore day and night, and a sable troika rug, which he offered me in a generous moment, but I knew he would take it back in a less generous one so refused it.

In Australia I met with the utmost generosity and warmth from my audiences and a true understanding of the good music I sang to them. There was not a concert when the platform was not laden with bouquets from complete strangers, and I was also given wonderful jewels, but they were mostly opals, about which I am superstitious, so I threw them into the sea.

The hotel proprietors received one like a favourite relation. First among them was Miss McCrea of the Oriental Hotel in Melbourne, the most charming, solicitous person, and a real friend. My apartment was filled with orchids when I arrived and during the entire time I stayed there, and when I left for other cities she always had a basket of flowers and delicacies sent on ahead.

Madame Melba was a great hostess in Melbourne, but she ignored me and was in fact most unkind. Before my arrival she gave many concerts with tickets at very low prices, and as she was greatly loved in her own country, the halls were packed and pockets were emptied before I arrived.

Some of the concert halls were so cold that I had to have a little electric lamp under the train of my dress or I could not have sung. As the curtain went up, I would be discovered standing on the platform, did not dare move and had to wait to leave the stage until the curtain came down again. The lamp made me laugh and also sweat a little, but I was most grateful for it: it was an invention of my beloved Eva.

After one of the Melbourne concerts many people were

running after our car to say some last affectionate goodbyes, and I noticed a beautiful middle-aged woman who could hardly breathe from the exertion. I had an inexplicable feeling of having seen her before, told the driver to stop, and begged her to get into the car. Then I asked her to tell me her name and she answered: "Marguerite, it was I who brought you into the world, and how proud I am!" I put my arms round her, kissed her warmly and said: "It was worth coming all this way to meet you." She was married to a well-known sportsman, who owned one of the finest ranches in Australia. I saw her constantly and she made me a birthday cake so enormous that two porters had to carry it in. By this time I had become very conscious of my figure, so insisted on Eva, who had a big appetite but never grew fat, eating as much of it as she could.

These are but a few random memories of the tour, which was a patchwork of varied experiences with many wonderful moments, in which I tried to forget my obsessing sorrow and the sordid worries that were so many.

It was night-time when the ship docked in Tahiti. The air was laden with mixtures of scents I had never encountered before and could not define; everywhere was the sound of high laughter and the tinkling of glass lanterns on little push-carts, filled with exotic fruits and sweets covered in lovely-coloured papers that made them look like dead butterflies.

With the ship's Captain I went to visit Gauguin's home. It had been turned into a hotel and was kept by a Scots-woman and a little French gigolo with a high-pitched voice and precious manners: his eyes were so small and evil in his pale, weak face that he frightened me. The huge proprietress was so much in love with him that she did all the work while he sat on a high stool in a spotless linen suit with brilliantined hair, so perfumed that, combined with the smell of the fish I was eating, it made me quite ill. I had to leave the

table and go into the garden, then walked further and came upon a little pointed building with an endless steeple in a field of daisies, where little children, all dressed in white, shepherded by Chinese nuns also in white, were amusing each other in a ring-a-round-a-roses dance. They looked at me curiously, but I could not make friends with them or their teachers, and when I tried to photograph them they ran away like a herd of startled deer: they think there is something evil about a camera, I was afterwards told.

The Captain ordered a car and drove Eva and me and another young man down to the beach for a picnic with much food and wine. On the way we passed Chinese huts with women of great beauty coming out of them. They were dressed in black jackets and trousers and large straw hats with black streamers hanging from them. On their shoulders were wooden yokes with balancing from them two heavy pails of water. Their feet too were beautiful with long flat toes, shod in straw sandals, the colour of their hats. Their voices could be heard from afar, strange metallic sounds like wild birds fighting and knocking their bills together. The men seemed to do little work and we saw few of them: they ran away when they saw us, cursing, I think, from the rage on their faces.

The beach on which we sat was like pale fawn cloth. There were fishes with flowing tails like mermaids swimming in the water: they might have been discarded flowers, blue, pink, red and even mauve. Oh to have been in love with either of my companions, I thought. Had I been, I would never have left Tahiti and that magic shore.

Driving through the town, however, I was disillusioned. The Frenchmen and women were completely different types from the Chinese; they were derelict human beings, who had emigrated there to carry on their vices with greater ease. Opium was sold like coffee: everyone was an addict. I was glad to be with our Captain, and so realise I was not in a strangely peopled dream: he was full of the fun of a middle-

class mariner, and all the things that amazed and shocked me passed by him unperceived.

Honolulu with its Oriental atmosphere and American grooming was my idea of heaven. I gave a concert there and my audience was varied and interesting. Smart American men and women filled the front rows; towards the back was a mixture of every nationality, and standing against the walls were the Hawaiian men in poses, quite natural to them, that could have competed with the great statues of the world. The hall was too light and lacked the mystery to which I was accustomed. All the green curtains were drawn over the glass roof, and this sent down uncomfortable shafts of over-brilliant light, that distracted me so that I was unable to create. The audience, however, was most enthusiastic and I was literally smothered in *leis*, and branches of orchids were heaped in my arms. I was begged to stay on and inundated with invitations, but I feared it would be too dangerous to remain in that world of beauty and freedom. How easily one could succumb to temptation if one had not one's living to earn!

I left immediately after the concert, followed by hundreds of people whom I had not even met, all of them still begging me to stay. When I got back to the ship, the sailors were waiting to pull up the gangplank and gave me a wonderful welcome. Many artists can boast of having had cars and carriages kept waiting for them, but to have kept an ocean liner is a prouder story.

I remember too Colombo, where the streets were dusty and the women in lovely saris dragged along dirty children, letting the saris too trail in the dust; and the Fiji Islands, which did not interest me greatly. I envied, however, the Islanders their quantities of hair and longed to take it home to my bald, intellectual friends, who looked like monks but were not so jovial.



Canada—America



THE LURE of America, as I have already said, was strong for me and, year after year, I went back there. I could write several volumes of my impressions of that great land and of the many personalities I met and the faithful friends I made in the United States and Canada, but I will only tell of a few.

My souvenirs of Canada are above all of pure, silver air, the vastness of its lands and the warm hearts and hospitality of its people, both rich and poor. There I felt like a bird released from its cage, not knowing on which tree to rest.

The concert I best remember was the one I gave in Calgary. The hall was made of wood and was as simple as a primitive church. The most interesting members of the audience were the lumberjacks, leaning against the walls in their sheepskin jackets, their thumbs tucked into their waistcoat pockets, and curiosity in their wide, untouched eyes. At the end, their great hands applauded with feverish enthusiasm and I felt that I had reached their hearts, though they could not have explained why, and I was proud and happy.

Of my American experiences, my second appearance at the Chicago Opera House was one that gave the most pleasure. Carl Van Vechten had taken Mary Garden to one of my New York recitals and she had been impressed by my

singing and thought my artistry had grown with the years. When he told of my Delilah and Carmen, she did me the great honour of inviting me to sing Delilah on her Season's opening night.

The rehearsals were most exciting. One was given time to become at home with the artists with whom one was singing, which is most important; and we were made to feel happy and important under the direction of the very lovable Harold McCormack. Lucien Muratore was again singing. He was a fine actor and though he had not a great voice like Caruso, his poetic feeling towards art and his colouring and phrasing were to me more important. It was always interesting to sing with him: he and Mary Garden together made an unforgettable pair in every opera in which they appeared.

My first night might have been a disaster. My entrance on to the stage was—as it always seemed to be—down a flight of stone steps. These had been badly put together by a stage-hand, and as I came down them, looking at Muratore and singing my opening phrase, I slipped and fell full length. Muratore's natural impulse was to help me to get up, but with my eyebrows I deterred him and remained reclining on the stairs with one hand underneath me, with such grace—I hope—that it might have been part of the performance. Then I raised myself on one thumb, of which I lost the use for an entire year, and took the stage, apparently calm and unshaken, with my crown not even tilted. The ovation from the audience was breath-taking. In some way that must have been a psychic fall, for when I opened my letters after the performance, I found one from a madman, who wrote that, *Samson* being his favourite opera and I his favourite singer, he prayed that either the Opera House would catch fire or I would fall during the evening, but I cannot explain how he worked his spell.

I received countless telegrams from all over America congratulating me on my safety and the self-control I had

shown, among them one from Ben, simply saying: "Blood will tell."

Of the many interesting personalities living in Chicago at that time, one who made a deep impression on me was a remarkable woman, the wife of the poet, Vaughan Moody. She was a teacher at the University when they married, and they were extremely poor. Being a fine cook, she one day decided to sell her cooking instead of the knowledge for which she was so badly paid, and rising from cakes to dinners she eventually opened a successful restaurant in the smart quarter of Chicago, where one could enjoy the dishes of every land. The kitchens were in a huge factory on six floors, controlled by chefs from all over the world.

She herself lived on the South side, the most dangerous part of the city: it had been the fashionable quarter, but was now only inhabited by coloured people, who respected her, and hers was the only mansion of the glorious past. It was my privilege to stay with her in the old brownstone house: I was the only woman she had ever asked to sleep under her roof. There were no servants, and fields of dust lay on the furniture, which was bare and of no value, but there were wonderful pieces of sculpture and lovely paintings, most of them gifts from grateful students and people she had helped. She had six secretaries with eyes that were starving, but not for food. My favourite among them was Bessie O'Neil, who was untidy physically but had a fine brain and an international sense of humour. We were waited on at table by young students of many nations, whom Mrs. Moody was putting through college, one of them an attractive Korean boy named Kim with eyes that seemed to reach to his temples.

I was to sing *Carmen* for my second appearance at the Opera House and begged the six secretaries to help me embroider my white lace mantilla with opaque sequins: it had belonged to my grandmother and I felt that its vibrations

might do something mesmeric for those aged virgins who had never had a chance to be loved. I did not take dinner the night before I sang, and Bessie came to my room. As we were talking quietly, the curtains fluttered and Kim appeared on the window-sill, reminding me of Nijinsky when he leapt through the window in *Le Spectre de la Rose*. He was taken aback when he saw Bessie, but she left the room discreetly. He told me he was going to hear me sing and begged me, when I came home, not to lock my window. I answered: "That depends entirely on the weather." After kissing my hands and kneeling with his head on the bed in complete silence, with one spring he was out and gone.

The entire household was at the Opera House to hear me, and afterwards Mrs. Moody gave a party for me of her friends whom I had not met. Among them was a young man, very good-looking and intelligent but dangerous, I felt. Mrs. Moody asked me casually what I thought of him, and I said I was not attracted as I usually was by an outstanding personality.

I left to give several concerts in different parts of the country, and when I came back to Chicago I learned that the young man was living in her house: she had given him a Steinway piano, a car and the directorship of her entire business. Bessie met me for lunch and, weeping copiously, told me that he had taken the whole house under his command and had imposed the condition that I should never again cross the threshold, as he felt I should be eliminated from Mrs. Moody's life. He must have sensed my feeling about him—and how right it was! Mrs. Moody died a ruined, abandoned old woman. I was never able to learn the tragic details.

Another vivid memory I cherish is of San Francisco, the rendezvous of the most charming, travelled Americans, with its Chinese quarter and theatre of Chinese artists, where the plays and costumes follow to the letter their great tradition.

The restaurants there are an experience in themselves. In the Japanese one, where I had to leave my shoes at the door and sit cross-legged on the floor, I regretted for the first and only time that I was not a giraffe to be able to reach my plate on the very low table.

The Opera House was intimate and beautiful, and the audiences smart, gay and appreciative: it was delightful to sing to them. Their hospitality was overwhelming: they seemed to live only for enjoyment and I sometimes wondered if they had ever wept.

California with its overwhelming beauty made a tremendous appeal to me, but I did not find it conducive to work amid such beauty and in the radiant, constant sunshine. Nevertheless, I gave a concert at the splendid hall downtown in Los Angeles that was one of the greatest successes I had on the other side of the Atlantic.

When I left, I promised myself that I would come back one day to rest and waste time in a beautiful way in that lovely land. I came—but how little I guessed then in what circumstances it would be!

The orchestral concert at which I sang in Washington is another happy memory, for it was conducted by Leopold Stokowski, and Ben, who was still at the Peruvian Embassy there, was able to be present.

Stokowski was attractive but difficult; he looked like an aged faun. I realised he was not particularly interested in me—I was just another prima donna—until he saw the programme I had chosen; then its complexities made him respect me. "*La Mer*," by Borodin, one of the greatest songs for voice and orchestra, would have been enough without the "*Proses Lyriques*" of Debussy, which are a life-and-death struggle in themselves. We had an all-too-brief rehearsal but came through the evening triumphantly, and what had begun as animosity ended in mutual interest.

When Ben came round to see me afterwards I thought he looked ill, but he indignantly denied it. I felt that for the first time my severe, adored brother was proud of me, and I told him I had tried to give more than my best in gratitude to him for having helped me so generously to become an artist. He objected, however, to the pauses I had made between the songs, finding that they were too long and kept Stokowski waiting. I said I was sorry but I had to have time to change my moods.

After the concert there was a reception and a dear old lady came up to me and said she had heard I was a sister of the Marquis de Buenavista, could it be true?

"Yes," I replied, "but I will tell you a great secret: I am only his illegitimate sister."

She took it quite seriously and answered: "Ah, I thought it would be impossible for anyone with so much temperament to be the legitimate sister of one so reserved."

Suddenly catching Ben's eye, I got nervous and begged her not to tell him what I had said, which of course she did. He was furious, and it completely ruined my stay. When I left, I wrote to him, promising that when I came back to sing at the White House I would behave. I had never quite lost the feeling of seeing him as our schoolmaster in his spectacles behind the oak desk.

When I returned, I stayed at his delightful flat. He had forgiven me and I felt happy and at home. There were flowers everywhere and his pie-eyed bulldog, the greatest clown it has been my joy to meet, came into the room with a bunch in his mouth, deposited it at my feet and then looked into my eyes for his payment, a lump of sugar for which he jumped almost to the ceiling, catching it in his voracious pink jaws. Ben looked frail, but as he exercised exaggeratedly, his muscles humming through his suits with a Stradivarius quality of which he was proud, I tried not to worry.

The reception at the White House with Mr. and Mrs.

Coolidge was enjoyable, but it was a difficult place to sing in: the stage was so high I felt the audience would only be able to see the inside of my nostrils. Mr. Coolidge's only remark after the concert was that it had been "most acceptable," which from anybody else would have been a mental smack in the face, but, as is well known, he was a man of few words. Mrs. Coolidge had a warm, delightful personality.

I took with me to Washington my much loved accompanist, Lyell Barbour. I have not spoken of him before, but I wish to pay a great tribute to his art and friendship over the years. He has all the selflessness of the great accompanist and is a great pianist too, who now gives fine recitals of his own. He is a poet by nature and in love with words as I am, so he respected and understood my taking liberties within the time, which is a God-given gift, if your accompanist can share it. The ecstasy we both felt in working together was an intimacy of souls meeting in complete harmony through music. On our journeys together we discussed art, philosophy and human beings, and the travelling, so monotonous when one was alone, with him became a joy. Dear Lyell, how lucky I was to have met you!



London—Paris



EACH year after my travels I went back to England, for a holiday and to give recitals at the Queen's or Wigmore Hall for my faithful English audiences. I was always happy singing there, but I have two outstanding memories that overshadow all the rest.

The first is of the concert in the Albert Hall, given in memory of the English and French soldiers who had fallen in the Battle of the Somme, at which I was asked to sing by Lord Burnham. I was infinitely moved by the cause and the honour of being the artist chosen to serve it.

It was a memorable afternoon. Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary were present, and the French Government sent over a military orchestra. It was arranged that I should open the concert by singing the Marseillaise, but I was not warned that on the platform would be standing a little creature who had once been a tall man, but was now blinded, with stumps for legs and only one arm, into which were tucked the flags of France and England. I was so overwhelmed by the pity and horror of this living picture of what war can do, that for a few moments my voice left me and I could only declaim instead of singing the anthem, with tears running down my cheeks. At the end of the concert I had an ovation I shall never forget, and to crown it all I was told that the French Minister of Fine Arts had flown over especially from France to decorate me with the Order

of the Diamond Palms. It was almost too much, and when Lord Burnham led me to be presented to their Majesties, I fancied they looked at me with surprise. I must have appeared strange to them with my brown and gold draperies, golden leaves in my hair, and pale, tear-stained face. They were most gracious and, when I asked their forgiveness for having been unable to sing the Marseillaise, they said it was more moving in the circumstances as I had given it.

When I left the hall with my sisters, mounted police were trying to discipline the crowds, who rushed towards us, begging for some of the flowers that filled our arms and urging me to stay in London, and it was with difficulty that we reached the car. How frightening a mob can be, even when moved by love!

My second unforgettable English memory links directly with this. The Dean of Westminster happened to be passing the Albert Hall at that moment and stopped to ask a policeman the cause of the excitement. The policeman explained that it was an affectionate demonstration from the crowd towards me after the Somme concert, at which their Majesties had been present. The Dean was impressed and later invited me to sing in Westminster Abbey for the Restoration of the Abbey Fund. It was perhaps the most moving event of my career. I sang from the organ loft, "O rest in the Lord," "Have Mercy, O Lord" by Stradella, and "God shall wipe away all tears," so I could not see the dense crowds that filled the Abbey, and as my voice floated down through the grey aisles I felt so near to God that I would have chosen that moment to die, if only one were given the choice.

I came back to Europe after my Washington concert with a heavy heart. I was anxious about Ben and would have been happy to stay with him, but he did not wish me to; and it was time for the summer holiday. The Montagus had decided to spend it that year at Cap d'Antibes, attracted by

my stories of other times I had stayed there, when it was not the playground of millionaires, but of artists, composers, poor royalty and a few charming adventurers. Then Grace Moore, who had not yet become an opera singer, had lived in a little bungalow in the middle of the pines with her teacher, Maestro Marafiotti, with whom she studied for three hours a day. She never bathed but ran round in a white bathing suit.

I could not swim but, wearing a bright red suit, would plunge into the endlessly deep-blue sea to the delight of the entire crowd, who would run down to the rocks when it was announced that I was about to enter the water. Charlie MacArthur, the writer and later Helen Hayes's husband, was my swimming instructor: he was a powerful swimmer and one of the most delightful, gifted Americans I have ever met.

For our holiday the Montagus rented an attractive bungalow on the sea near the Hôtel du Cap. It had one large studio-sitting-room with a lovely view, and an untidy, flower-filled garden with little steps leading down to the rocks. There was a big clanking bell, which should have belonged to a monastery, with drama in its sound, and an aggressive, dishonest caretaker, who cooked so well that we almost forgave her.

At first everything seemed enchanting, but I felt a strange presence in the house and somehow, even in the golden sunshine, it was sad. One day as I walked through the garden, I fancied I saw a coffin near the windows. It proved to be only a drawer that had been put out on two plant-stands to be cleaned, but my teeth chattered and I could not rest. Sometimes we would talk late into the night, afraid to shut our doors, and if we did, they would open by themselves. We all felt the place to be haunted but I felt more than that: I was waiting for something to happen that I dared not name.

When it came, I realised that I had known all the time

what it would be. One sunny morning I received a cable telling me that Ben had died.

From Antibes I went to Paris, where Eva Woolf awaited me. I was very ill from shock and sadness and had to have a nurse from the Sisters of Mercy to take care of me. I was so hoarse I could hardly speak, and to sing was out of the question. A great throat-specialist promised me that if I had patience my voice would return.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "It happens to the birds, so why should it not happen to you?"

I did not know what to do. I felt I could not return to America until the hurt in my heart was appeased, and finally decided to live with Eva in my loved Paris, to rest and study and give nature time to heal me in her own miraculous way.

With difficulty I found a wonderful apartment in the Faubourg St. Honoré that had been part of Lafayette's palace. Its beauty is difficult to paint in words. The proportions of the eighteenth-century rooms were perfect and, though they were very large, they were intimate and needed little furniture. On the frieze round the walls golden cherubs eternally chased baby goats, whom they would never capture. The handles of the large windows, which came nearly down to the ground, were of goats' heads of gilded brass. The fireplaces were immense and my nostrils will never forget the perfume of the logs we burned there.

From America I sent for all my possessions to furnish my new home. It was then that they were destroyed in the disastrous fire at the station of the Batignolles, to which I have already referred. Eva and I were at a cinema that evening and saw a picture of the warehouse in flames. All that I had inherited from my father—thirteenth-century Spanish furniture, paintings by famous masters, silver, sculpture, jewellery—all were burned to a cinder. Nothing was left me but my piano, a bed and a ladder. It was symbolic, surely—

the piano for work, the bed for sleep, and the ladder for aspiration.

This fresh, terrible shock was one that I could hardly stand in the weak condition in which Ben's death had left me. But after a time it diverted my neurasthenic mind to pick up pieces of furniture in different parts of Paris, and even in the Flea Market I was able to find treasures. I came to take great pleasure in the apartment and gradually grew better. My voice came back, but I never felt the same security in it as before, and the pressure on my heart, which I had had as a child, troubled me anew.

I gave concerts at the Salle Pleyel and then returned for a short visit to America. After a recital at the Town Hall in New York I was happy to return to my lovely home. Then came fresh troubles.

After innumerable difficulties and delays I had managed to extract the insurance money for my burned possessions from the American company, but there was also a large sum as compensation owing me from the French Government. Of this I could not get a franc, and at last I decided rashly to go to law.

After unfortunate experiences with two French lawyers, who did nothing for me but take my cheques, I was introduced to one who seemed helpful, sympathetic and kind. I was leaving to sing in Vienna and he asked for a power of attorney so that he could draw his expenses while I was away. I gave it a little doubtfully.

When I came back to Paris, every penny of my American insurance money had been drawn out. I tried frantically to get in touch with the kindly lawyer at his office: it was closed. Then I went to the police. They found his home address and told me I must go there with two of their men to confront him. When we reached the apartment, he was in bed and we marched into his room. I accused him of the theft of my money and he calmly confessed—irony of ironies—that he

had taken it to pay the expenses of a concert tour for his wife, who was a singer. I felt like shooting him.

The police ordered him to get up. He did so and was wearing a nightshirt instead of pyjamas and I nearly burst out laughing, in spite of my rage. But melodrama followed. He asked to be allowed to go to the bathroom to dress. We heard the key turn in the lock, the gendarmes rushed and with a violent kick forced the door and were just in time to prevent his opening a vein in his wrist. He fell at my feet, wept bitterly and begged me not to have him sent to prison. I began to feel pity and told the police I did not want revenge, only my money. They answered: "Madame, this has nothing to do with you any longer," put handcuffs on his wrists and led him away. It was a horrible experience.

Soon came the court citation and I had to go to the Palais de Justice. I felt terrible, seeing my fatherly lawyer in the dock: he looked like a circus bear that had been tamed. The judge was on the whole more sympathetic to him than to me. Had I been fair and fluffy, his attitude would have been different. Never was there a truer saying than Anita Loos's, gentlemen prefer blondes, for men see them as children whom they want to protect and never suspect that the colour of their hair is often not psychological but out of a hair-dresser's bottle.

The lawsuit dragged on in a truly French way: I sometimes thought that had I had children, they might get some of my money in their lifetime. At last judgment was given that the prisoner should repay me, but as he could only do so in irregular instalments, he was perpetually being popped back into prison—a Gilbert and Sullivan kind of justice. Finally I heard the poor wretch had died in prison, and that was the end of the repayments. And I never received one franc from the French railway, only lawyers' bills that seemed to go on forever.

Nothing went well: luck seemed to have turned against me. I undertook recitals in Holland and Germany, arranged by the manager who pocketed my money and was afterwards confronted by Gerald Montagu. The Dutch concert proved the greatest failure of my career. I sang well and was beautifully dressed, but nothing melted that phlegmatic audience. After each group of songs I went off the platform to the sound of my own heels and did not have one encore: they just sat and stared. I was so depressed that had I not been bound to go on to Berlin I would have made straight for home.

I did not really wish to sing in Germany. Mamma had inculcated me with her hatred of the people and I felt almost a traitor in going there. But I had a great success which almost made up for what I had gone through in Holland. Ivor Newton came from London to play for me and gave of his splendid best. We were afterwards invited by an American admirer to a night club of questionable reputation, where we were waited on by the most beautiful men, with perfect figures, dressed as sailors in immaculate white linen suits. It was very amusing but the mental indigestion of Holland was still with me, and beneath my forced gaiety I longed for my bed with its wonderful mattress of the softest feathers, into which I could sink and seek in oblivion that peace that cannot be bought or found in night clubs.

I returned home gladly, but Paris seemed changed—or was it I? I felt I had lost courage, perhaps faith. The lawyers' bills and the defaulting manager had crippled me financially. I was discouraged and disillusioned. Living was expensive, and most unwillingly I decided I must give up the apartment and take with me all of its beauty that could travel and go back to England. England was my real home: my sisters and the Montagus were there; it was Eva's home too. Perhaps only there would I find security and peace.



England—America



WE PACKED up and came to London. But England was changed too. A shadow was creeping over the sun—only as large as a man's hand as yet, but it was there. Another war? Surely man's insanity could not stretch so far. Everyone was afraid: everyone tried to push away the fear.

I wanted to take a home of my own but something made me hesitate. I put my furniture and few treasures into storage: they are still there.

The months went by. One could settle to nothing. Then came Munich and "peace in our time." One did not believe it.

The following spring I gave two or three recitals at the Aeolian Hall. Gerald Moore played for me brilliantly and I was happy in a way to be there again. But the glory had faded. The hall was filled with ghosts. My audiences had scattered and the few faithful ones from the past seemed incredibly old. Was I getting old too? I did not feel it, only terribly tired. Marie came, but her two sons were grown-up now and the shadow was on her heart. Suzie's husband had died; she was not well and could not leave her daughters and her Cheshire home. After the concerts there were parties and flowers and compliments as of old, but the parties were not so gay as yesterday's, the flowers seemed more dimly coloured, and the compliments sounded thin.

In the summer, I went with the Montagus to Cap Ferrat.

It was a happy family holiday—the last there would ever be. We came back on the day of Germany's pact with Russia and knew then that the shadow had blotted out the sun. The Montagus went down to the country for a time, and Eva and I went with them. I could not join them when they sat silently round the wireless, waiting for Chamberlain's declaration of war, but went alone to the end of the garden. It was a lovely morning. A bird was singing. An aeroplane purred overhead. I looked up at the sky and waited too. After an hour—or a few minutes—Firenza came to me from the house and we went back into it together without a word. The knell had sounded of the world we knew.

It is difficult and painful to write of the weeks that followed. I was ill in mind and body, and looking back I realise I had never been the same since Ben's death. The doctor said "Rest"—as well tell a pauper to drink champagne. Everything was in flux. The Montagus were making plans for war service: there was no place in them for me. The household was disorganised. At night the windows were hermetically sealed and the curtains tightly drawn, shutting out the lovely country scents and air. Claustrophobia gripped me.

I longed desperately to feel I could be of use in the days that lay ahead, but no one seemed to need me. Marie's two boys were already in the army and, masking her own fears with the strength of her faith, she was making her home a centre of sympathy and help for her circle of devoted friends. There was no room for me there.

I could go to Suzie in Chester, but what would I do? Everyone said there would be no place for serious music in England's war effort. How wrong they were proved! Some urged me to go away. It would be a short war, they said. I seemed to have heard that before.

I went to London with Eva. Only she was unchanged, and I read in her faithful eyes the biblical: "Whither thou

goest. . . ." The streets were crowded with soldiers and people still friendly and kind. Lost dogs and newspapers raced down them together, blown by what seemed evil winds. Civilians had taken the place of many of the policemen. The departments in the big stores, except those for food, were empty deserts: the assistants stood round, silent and still, like dummies. The blackout made the nights eerie beyond words; I was afraid to go out after dark.

Hour after hour I lay without sleep, fighting my secret battle. What was this urge to escape? Should I conquer or follow it? It did not come from cowardice, I knew—I was not afraid to suffer or die—but rather from a sense of futility and frustration, a fear of being useless, ill, and a burden on others. It was this fear, I think, that decided me. I would go away and hide in America—in California perhaps—and if I had to die, it should be alone or on the ocean.

It was cruelly hard to speak of my decision. I felt I was disappointing those who loved me and whom I loved most, and I could only pray they would understand in the end. I asked Eva if she was afraid to go with me, and she answered: "Only afraid that you might want to go alone."

The shipping office was besieged by anxious crowds, and we were told that to get passages for the United States was impossible for several weeks. Suddenly I was recognised by a tall official, who was in control of the situation, and through his kind offices we were able to leave far sooner than we had expected.

I cannot speak of the goodbyes and I remember very little of the voyage. The ship was terribly overcrowded, the decks packed with refugees, sleeping as they could. She was so low in the water that it seemed she might go down at any moment, but I did not care. I lay in my berth most of the time, sick at heart and ill. There was lifeboat drill every day, in which I did not join. One night there was an enor-

mous thud, followed by panic-stricken screams and the sound of thousands of feet running on to the decks. Eva and I did not stir. If it were a submarine . . . but it was only a whale that the ship had struck.

We arrived safely in New York harbour. Rooms had been taken for us in a small hotel and Eva looked after me solicitously, for I was very ill.

After a time I felt I must make an effort to try and sing in New York. I knew it would be hard. Time had passed, new singers had appeared, my footprints had grown faint on the sands where I had passed.

I went to see the director of one of the biggest agencies. He looked at me searchingly and told me of the staggering sum it would cost to "stage a come-back."

"You know, D'Alvarez," he ended casually, "we heard you were dead."

I stared at him and could not answer: I was stunned. It seemed a symbolic warning. Then in a flash I knew what I must do. I would give no encores. I would leave the hall while the lights were still burning and before the applause had died away. I went to California and did not sing in public again.




Epilogue





Epilogue

 IN THE spring of 1949 D'Alvarez came back to England. She came almost unchanged into a world of restrictions and frustration, of functional values which she hated, and the end of privilege which she loved. Nor did she find the welcome she had expected. Her friends were war-worn and weary, harassed by unaccustomed burdens, happy to see her but with little time to spare.

She tried to understand, to settle down, but tragedy was there to meet her. When she first landed, a fortune-teller, reading her hand, exclaimed: "Oh, what have you come home to?" and it proved only too true. Her sister Suzie had died during the war. The first summer of her return, Marie was taken suddenly ill and lived only a few weeks. Now all of them were gone—her parents, Ben, Marie, Suzie: she was alone. The Montagus, her "second family," remained, but their lives too were changed and there was no spare corner in their home.

She stayed at first with another friend. In a few months, that friend collapsed and died in the street without warning. For a time she moved to the Three Arts Club, where she became ill and was devotedly nursed by the Club's house-keeper, Miss Carrick, who soon afterwards was killed in a car accident.

Later, the Montagus were able to arrange for her to be with them as of old, and in 1950 she came back to the room she had left eleven years before. With her wonderful resil-

ience, like that of a young girl, she began to make a new life for herself and soon became the centre of an ever-widening circle. Old friends reappeared: new ones fell happy captives to her magnetic charm, imagination and the brilliant talk that could hold any company spellbound. To be with her heightened experience; it gave a sharper edge to pleasure, a clearer vision of beauty, a truer understanding of pain.

She gave a few lessons and proved an inspiring teacher. She played in two films—*Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* and *Twenty-four Hours in a Woman's Life*—and though she had only minor parts, her sure dramatic instinct, even in this new medium, made them outstanding. She fitted into an unaccustomed family life, helping with the household chores and the cooking, which she always loved.

On the surface all was well, but underneath was the profound sadness, the inner insecurity, that had always lain below her superficially vivid joy in life: it had grown stronger with the years. Shock, less good health, anxiety, had affected the wonderful voice. This in itself was a bitter grief, though she seldom spoke of it.

A fear of the future haunted her, the inherited French dread of an unprovided-for old age. She was so ageless in herself, so invincibly young, that she could not realise, nor could her friends, that old age must be almost there. She longed for a home of her own, where she could have unrestricted freedom, but dreaded the loneliness and responsibility that it would bring.

Her super-sensitivity had become more acute and made her so conscious of the rose's thorns that she would often only feel the pricks and be unable to see the rose. The heart trouble, which had grown worse in California, was always pressing, and every emotional disturbance—and there were many, for emotion was her life—accentuated it.

In the summer of 1953 she decided to take a cure in Montecatini and to go first to Alassio, where friends were

staying. She refused to leave until she had finished the manuscript of this book, which she had begun in California and had been working on intensively for many months. It was completed in the first week of September, and two or three days later she left, apparently well and happy, though she had a strange reluctance to go.

The first day after she reached Alassio, while she was walking with her friend in the piazza before the statue of St. Francis, she had a serious heart attack and collapsed. The local doctor at first diagnosed a heat-stroke, but her friend, becoming alarmed, arranged for her to be moved from the hotel to the beautiful Val d'Olivio Clinic above the town. Here she had a second and far worse attack, that proved to be a coronary thrombosis, from which it was not expected she would recover. The Montagus were wired to, and rushed out to Alassio, where they were able to stay in the Clinic itself.

For seven weeks the fight for life went on. The heart gradually responded to treatment and rest, and above all to the devotion of the doctors and nurses and the wonderful Signorine Robutti, the owners and ministering directors of the Clinic, dedicated spirits both.

Everything that she most needed was around her—love, first and foremost—"I cannot live without love," she said—mental relaxation, the Italian sunshine, friends, for besides the Montagus others came from England to visit her.

Hope grew. Her strength increased and there was talk of her being moved to the window, whence she would be able to watch the sea that she so dearly loved. "In three days," the doctor promised her.

In the early hours of the next morning, October 18th, at 5 a.m. she woke suddenly, breathed with difficulty and in a moment without suffering or foreknowledge had passed away. As her heart had ruled her all her life, so fittingly it ruled her death.

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